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Texas Charter Schools and Students with Disabilities: Parental Perceptions of the Phenomenon

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Texas Charter Schools and Students with Disabilities: Parental Perceptions of the Phenomenon

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Dedication

To Saint Therese of Lisieux,

(The Little Flower)

My mother,

Edith Alexander Shields

And my husband,

Mike Leggett

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Texas Charter Schools and Students with Disabilities: Parental Perceptions of the Phenomenon

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Abstract: This qualitative study describes the perceptions of parents of students with disabilities regarding their charter school experience in the state of Texas. A total of six parents and five staff/administrators at two different Texas charter schools were interviewed for this study. Parents described the reasons for transferring their children from traditional public schools to charter schools and the differences in educational programs in the two settings. The primary category that emerged from an analysis of the data was that the needs of the child were not being met in the traditional public school setting. This manifested itself in both emotional difficulties for the child and academic failure. Parents further reported that special education services in traditional public school were either ineffectual or problematic. Attempts to change the system did not work for these parents, who were generally unaware of the charter school alternative. Most parents reported that their children experienced years of school failure and emotional difficulties before they learned of the charter school alternative. Parents became aware of their child's charter school from friends, neighbors, church members, an educational

association, and in one instance, the child's traditional public school. Upon enrollment in the charter school all parents reported an increased sense of emotional well being in their children. Parents noted that the small school size produced positive outcomes. Overall, parents reported that their children were emotionally happier and in most cases improved academically as well. The majority of parents noted that while they saw improvements in their children after enrolling in charter schools that charter schools were not perfect either. Parents said that charter schools did not offer the full array of educational and extracurricular activities available in traditional public school and attributed this to a lack of funding available for charter schools. In the area of special education, some parents struggled with teachers who lacked training in working with students with disabilities. Parents reported that this problem existed in both traditional public schools and charter schools but that they had more influence in dealing with teacher attitudes in the charter school environment.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Context of the Problem

The charter school movement has grown dramatically since 1991, spreading to 37 states and the District of Columbia. Charter schools provide services to more than 500,000 American school children each year (United States Department of Education, 2000a). Minnesota began the charter school movement in 1991 and Texas joined the bandwagon in 1995. Texas legislators authorized the first generation of charter schools after hearing testimony critical of traditional public schools in the state and the promises of parental choice, accountability, autonomy, and innovation promoted by a bipartisan coalition of charter school advocates (Fusarelli, 1998).

Since the first Texas charter school opened its doors in 1996, the movement in the state has followed the national pattern of dramatic growth, increasing from 17 charter schools serving 2,498 students during the 1996-1997 school year to 200 charter schools enrolling 37,696 students in school year 2000-2001 (Weiher, Shapley, & Stamman, 2002). Figures from the Texas Education Agency revealed that about 200 open-enrollment charter schools, some with multiple campuses, were serving school children in the state of Texas (Texas Education Agency, 2002). As the charter school movement gained momentum, an increasing number of parents of students with disabilities have enrolled their children in charter schools (Hawkins-Pammer, 2000). Legally, charter schools, like their counterparts in traditional public schools, are required to provide services to students with disabilities. All school choice options, including charter schools, are subject to the requirements of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, the

Americans with Disabilities Act, and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Estes, 2000).

Despite the increasing number of students with disabilities enrolling in charter schools nationwide, research on students with disabilities in charter schools is limited (Estes, 2000) and research on students with disabilities in charter schools in the state of Texas is even scarcer (Maughan, 2001). Historically, the charter school phenomenon is one aspect of a broader school choice movement that has been sweeping this country in recent decades and the school choice movement itself is part of an even larger school reform movement (Smith, 2001) that has its roots in dissatisfaction with student outcomes in traditional public schools.

Statement of the Problem

Recent controversy over the quality of public education is simply the latest chapter in an ongoing debate which goes back to the launching of Sputnik and concerns about how American students compare with students throughout the world (Good & Braden, 2000). Education in America has been described as being in a "crisis" since the 1983 publication of *A Nation at Risk,* a report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education which accused the nation's public education system of mediocrity (Good & Braden, 2000). That document advocated a major nationwide effort to raise the standards of student achievement (Clinchy, 1998).

Additionally, since the 1980s, dual themes of educational choice and market driven schools have been major themes of school reform (Kearney & Arnold, 1994). "Many advocates of choice argue that subjecting public schools to market forces will compel them to be more responsive to parents and students" (p. 112). The current educational landscape has been characterized as being in a great state of change (Finn & Gau, 1998)

with three current movements within the school choice arena changing the historical pattern of public/private choice: home schooling, school vouchers, and magnet schools (Poetter & Knight-Abowitz, 2001).

Charter schools are legislative creations and as such vary from state to state with the statutory language that created them (Harrington-Lueker, 1994; Koppich, 1997). Since there is considerable variability in state statutes, defining charter schools is difficult (Good & Braden, 2000). However, "a few features provide the defining characteristics of the movement" (Smith, 2001, p. 18). Those characteristics are incorporated into the definition of charter schools provided by the United States Department of Education. According to that definition, some of the common characteristics of charter schools are a charter contract for a set length of time, accountability for student achievement, and increased autonomy represented by freedom from some state regulatory requirements (United States Department of Education, 2002a).

Since their inception in 1991, charter schools have generated a great deal of controversy nationally. Proponents argued that charter schools would provide additional accountability, greater parental choice, and more innovative programming (Smith, 2001). "They argue that schools freed from the control of the existing public educational bureaucracy will be able to offer innovative methods of teaching and learning" (Smith, 2001, p. 19). "Innovative choices that work will attract parents and students. Because families will have choices, market competition and an entrepreneurial spirit will encourage change in other public schools" (p. 20). Proponents of charter schools argued further that as consumers exercised their choices it would spur competition, leading to improvements in public schools as well as more school options for parents.

Those opposing charter schools mainly expressed concerns that charter schools would siphon resources from an already besieged public school system. Critics expressed concerns that charter schools would pull much needed revenues from the public school coffers as per-pupil allotments followed students to their new schools. Additionally, some critics expressed equity concerns that charter schools would skim the best students and ultimately result in the resegregation of public schools, leaving them to educate the poorest and most challenging students (Smith, 2001). Finally, some opponents of charter schools feared the movement would encourage privatization of the public school system (Smith, 2001).

At the state level, charter schools also generated controversy. Arguments for and against charter schools preceded their adoption by the Texas Legislature in 1995 (Fusarelli, 1998). In 2001, following testimony about problems at some charter schools in the state, the legislature capped the number of open-enrollment charter schools at 215 and, in an effort to ensure greater accountability, transferred oversight of charter school amendments, renewals, and revocations from the State Board of Education to the Commissioner of Education (Weiher et al., 2002). Among the testimony presented before the legislature were reports of financial irregularities at some charter schools (Copelin, 2002). While results of a five-year study of Texas charter schools commissioned by the state showed high levels of parent and student satisfaction with charter schools statewide and high student achievement at some charter schools, overall traditional public schools outperformed charter schools on a variety of evaluation criteria (Shapley, Benner, & Stamman, 2002).

Further, in November of 2002, the Texas Commissioner of Education closed five Texas charter schools serving a total of 1,425 students for being rated low-performing for

two or more years. These were the first Texas charter schools closed for academic reasons (“Five Charter Schools,” 2002). Additionally, during the same month, the Travis County Public Integrity Unit began a criminal investigation into fraud allegations at three other charter schools in the state (Copelin, 2002). At the conclusion of the five-year report, five open-enrollment charters had been revoked by the State Board of Education, four of those for financial irregularities; and another 18 schools had returned their charters (Weiher et al., 2002).

As the charter school movement has grown throughout the nation, an increasing number of parents of students with disabilities are enrolling their children in charter schools (Hawkins-Pammer, 2000). However, scant research exists on students with disabilities nationally in charter schools and research on children with disabilities in Texas charter schools is even more limited. Little is known about why parents of students with disabilities in Texas are exercising the school choice option of placing their child in a charter school, how they perceive their child’s achievement in the new school, and how they feel special education services differ from the traditional public school they left behind. Parental choice is a philosophical cornerstone of the charter school movement, yet we know little about why and how that choice is being played out for students with disabilities in the state of Texas.

Purpose of the Study

A major focus of this study was to determine why parents of students with disabilities were choosing to transfer their children from traditional public schools to charter schools. This exploratory study further sought to examine parental perceptions of the differences between special education services in traditional public schools and those offered in charter schools and how parents perceived the effectiveness of services in each setting.

Research Questions

The following research questions were explored in this study:

1. Why are parents of students with disabilities in the state of Texas choosing to transfer their children from traditional public schools to charter schools?
2. What are parental perceptions of the differences, if any, between special education services in the charter school and the traditional public school they left behind?
3. What are the parental perceptions of the effectiveness of the special education services provided in their child's charter school as compared to special education services in traditional public schools?
4. What are the differences, if any, between parent and staff perceptions of special education services provided in charter schools?

CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

The literature on charter schools nationally and in the state of Texas has been reviewed with an emphasis on the research examining the impact of charter schools on students with disabilities. The review begins with an overview of the history of the charter school concept first formulated by New England educator Ray Budde. The history of the movement is traced from Budde's original concept to its subsequent embodiment in legislative form in 1991. The history of charter schools is followed by an overview of charter school legislation and a description of the national characteristics of charter schools. The review then examines the literature on special education in charter schools at the national level. This section is followed by an overview of the research on charter schools in the state of Texas and ends with an examination of the literature on special education in Texas charter schools.

History

While the beginnings of the charter school movement cannot be traced to an exact moment in time, most writers attribute the conception of the charter idea to New England educator Ray Budde (Garn & Cobb, 2001; Nathan, 1998). During the 1970s, Budde wrote the outline for a book that included the idea of chartering programs or departments within existing school districts (Budde, 1996). When colleagues and friends seemed uninterested in the proposal, Budde shelved it until the 1980s, when he wrote and published the book *Education by Charter: Restructuring School Districts* (1988). In his description of the process of writing the book, Budde (1996) proposed:

Teams of teachers could be chartered directly by a school board for a period of three

> to five years. No one – not the superintendent or the principal or any central office supervisors – would stand between the school board and the teachers when it came to matters of instruction. As in my first exploration of the idea, my focus was on chartering departments or programs. No mention was made of the idea of chartering whole schools (p. 72).

Following publication of the book, in 1988, the late Albert Shanker, then president of the American Federation of Teachers, publicly endorsed the charter idea (Budde, 1996; Garn & Cobb, 2001) and carried the concept a step further by suggesting that a school board could charter an entire school if teachers and the union agreed (Nathan, 1998). At around this time schools-within-schools called "charter schools" were formed in Philadelphia (Nathan, 1998). Students and educators selected some of these schools and others were assigned students and faculty.

During the 1980s the charter school concept first was refined in the state of Minnesota (Nathan, 1996). There, Joe Nathan, the director of the Center for School Change at the University of Minnesota's Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs, and Ted Kolderie, a former newspaper writer, were involved in the movement which Nathan noted was established on "three basic American values: responsibility for results; opportunity (in the words of Senn Brown of the Wisconsin School Boards Association), the chance 'to create the kind of public school you've dreamed about;' and choice within clear, explicit limits" (Nathan, 1996, p. 72).

Legislation

Concepts and philosophies of charter schools first were codified in the state of Minnesota with the enactment of legislation in 1991. California followed in 1992. By August of 2001, some form of charter school legislation existed in 37 states, the District

of Columbia and Puerto Rico, and there were over 2,000 charter schools serving over 500,000 students in the United States (Education Commission of the States, 2002). Existing charter school legislation varies widely from state to state (Harrington-Lueker, 1994: Koppich, 1997). Since considerable variability exists in charter statutes, defining charter schools is difficult (Good & Braden, 2000). However, "a few features provide the defining characteristics of the movement" (Smith, 2001, p.18). They are incorporated in the definition of charter schools provided by the United States Department of Education. According to that definition:

> Charter schools are nonsectarian public schools of choice that operate with freedom from many of the regulations that apply to traditional public schools. The 'charter' establishing each such school is a performance contract detailing the school's mission, program, goals, students served, methods of assessment, and ways to measure success. The length of time for which charters are granted varies, but most are granted for 3-5 years. At the end of the term, the entity granting the charter may renew the school's contract. Charter schools are accountable to their sponsor—usually a state or local school board—to produce positive academic results and adhere to the charter contract. The basic concept of charter schools is that they exercise increased autonomy in return for this accountability. They are accountable for both academic results and fiscal practices to several groups: the sponsor that grants them, the parents who choose them, and the public that funds them (United States Department of Education, 2002a).

The United States Department of Education conducted a four-year nationwide study of charter schools with the final year of that report published in the year 2000 (United States Department of Education, 2000a). Following their examination of state charter school legislation the study authors noted:

> Charter schools are a state phenomenon. Each piece of legislation grows from a state context and the laws create differences in the types and number of charter schools opened in each state, the level of freedom afforded charter schools, and the amount of accountability required of the schools (United States Department of Education, 2000a, p. 12).

According to that study, state statutes differ in the types of agencies that can grant charters. For example, in some states only the local school board can grant charters, and in others the state level agency has that exclusive authority. In the majority of states with charter legislation, multiple agencies have the statutory power to grant charters (United States Department of Education, 2000a).

Additionally, state statutes allowed for charter schools to be newly created or established in schools which were previously either public or private schools. According to the United States Department of Education report, each of the 37 states with charter legislation at that time enabled pre-existing schools to convert to charter status and all the state statutes except Mississippi provided for newly created schools. Also, legislation in a minority of states allowed private schools to convert to charter schools (United States Department of Education, 2000a).

State statutes also differ in the number of charter schools allowed. The United States Department of Education study determined that 22 of the states with charter school legislation placed limitations on the number of charter schools whether it was the number allowed during a year, the number allowed by the district, or the total number of charter schools permitted in a given state. However, 13 of the 37 states imposed no limitation on the number of charter schools allowed within their boundaries (United States Department of Education, 2000a).

Finally, charter statutes differ in the duration of the charter. All state statutes grant charters for a limited period of time subject to renewal. Throughout 31 states the charter terms range from 3 to 5 years. The longest charter terms (15 years) are in the District of Columbia and Arizona but both require reviews at the end of 5 years (United States Department of Education, 2000a).

While the United States Department of Education national study simply noted characteristics of legislation across the states, other commentators have analyzed the statutes in a more subjective fashion dependent upon their beliefs about charter schools and school reform. As a result, some authors have characterized charter legislation as either strong or weak depending on the autonomy granted to charter schools by state legislatures (Koppich, 1997; Saks, 1998). These authors or organizations describe statutes that grant greater autonomy to charter schools as strong and those that are more restrictive as weak. For example, Koppich noted, “Some state laws allow wide autonomy to charter schools, while others have been said to create ‘charters in name only,’ under strict control by the school district” (1997, p. 100).

The Center for Educational Reform has produced an annual ranking of charter school laws for several years. The Center for Educational Reform ranks state statutes as strong when they “foster the development of numerous and genuine independent charter schools. Weaker laws only provide infertile ground for advancing charter school growth” (Center for Educational Reform, 2002). The Center for Educational Reform gives charter schools a grade from A to F based on the organization’s weighing of 10 major components that members feel contribute to charter development such as the number of schools allowed, legal/operational independence, and fiscal autonomy. Statutory

amendments may result in a grade change according to Center for Educational Reform criteria.

Characteristics of Charter Schools

Since the legislation creating charter schools varies from state to state, the characteristics of charter schools also differ between individual states. However, national studies of charter schools have shown certain common characteristics.

Generally speaking, charter schools tend to have fewer students than traditional public schools. At the time of the fourth-year study, the United States Department of Education found that the median number of students in a charter school was 137 compared to a median of 475 in traditional public schools. However, for newly created charter schools the number was even smaller—128 (2000a). Not only are charter schools in general smaller than their traditional counterparts, research also indicates that class sizes tend to be smaller than in traditional schools with slightly lower teacher-pupil ratios overall. Also, students in these charter school classrooms were found to have a slightly lower mean student-to-computer ratio than in traditional public schools (United States Department of Education, 2000a).

In addition to their small size, a greater number of charter schools serve children with increased grade level configurations in one school. Over twice as many charter schools served students in grade configurations of kindergarten through eighth grade, kindergarten through twelfth grade, or ungraded schools as compared to traditional public schools (United States Department of Education, 2000a). National studies also showed that although charter schools have increased in number, they still serve a relatively small percentage of public school students. At the time of the fourth year of the United States Department of Education study on charter schools, only three states had two percent or

more of their public school students enrolled in charter schools. While the number of students in charter schools continued to increase throughout the nation, the state of California served the largest number of charter school students (United States Department of Education, 2000a).

Charter Schools and Special Education

As charter schools enroll an increasing number of public school students throughout the United States, they provide services to a growing number of students in various disability categories as well (Hawkins-Pammer, 2000). Parents exercising school choice have placed their children with disabilities in charter schools throughout the country (Hawkins-Pammer, 2000).

According to the fourth-year report on the state of charter schools by the United States Department of Education, charter schools at that time generally were serving a slightly lower percentage of students with disabilities than those served by all other public schools in the charter states (United States Department of Education, 2000a). Overall, study results indicated that charter schools enrolled three percent fewer students with disabilities than the public schools in the states where charter schools have been implemented. However, the study indicated that the percentage of students with disabilities in charter versus traditional schools varied considerably from state to state and charter schools in some states actually enrolled more students with disabilities than their traditional counterparts.

Legally, charter schools, like their traditional public school counterparts, are required to provide services to students with disabilities (United States Department of Education, 2000a). All school choice options, including charter schools, are subject to the

requirements of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, the Americans with Disabilities Act, and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Estes, 2000).

While research on students with disabilities in charter schools is very limited, some advocates, researchers, and commentators have expressed concerns that students with disabilities have not always received legally mandated services in charter schools (Estes, 2000). Among the areas discussed were accessibility, providing required services in students' individualized education programs (IEPs), having certified professionals providing special education services, and students' being denied admission to charter schools by being counseled by charter school personnel not to attend, being encouraged to leave, or being suspended (United States Department of Education, 2000b; Farber, 1998).

Farber (1998), an education reporter, described the treatment of a student with disabilities attending the Boston Renaissance Charter School, a Massachusetts charter school run by the for-profit Edison Project. According to Farber, in 1997 the United States Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights ruled that the student's rights were violated through regular use of restraints, suspensions, and removal from class (Farber, 1998). The United States Department of Education study on disability found that administrators at approximately one fourth of the charter schools studied said they were unable to serve students with certain disabilities and actively discouraged those parents from enrolling their children in the schools (United States Department of Education, 2000b). This "counseling out" to discourage students from attending the schools usually occurred informally during initial meetings between the school and parents but one school required parents to sign "a Waiver of Responsibility acknowledging that 'they (the

charter school) are not equipped, nor do they offer, special education services' " (United States Department of Education, 2000b, p. 21).

While accessibility was not an issue fully evaluated by United States Department of Education researchers, they noted the presence of ramps and restrooms that were accessible to persons with disabilities (United States Department of Education, 2000b). Researchers found that about two thirds of the schools visited at that time were marginally accessible in that there were no obvious physical barriers and at least one restroom was partially equipped for students using a wheelchair. The remaining schools were found to be inaccessible or had such limited accessibility that students in wheelchairs could not attend.

Although research has indicated some concerns about whether charter schools are meeting legislative requirements, a significant number of students with disabilities are being served in charter schools (Lange & Lehr, 2000). While parents are exercising their choice to enroll their children in charter schools, there are very limited studies to date examining why parents have chosen charter schools for their children with disabilities (Lange & Lehr, 2000). Very "little is known about the motivation for choice among parents whose children have disabilities" (p. 142).

However, according to Lange & Lehr (2000) the reasons parents choose to place their children in charter schools have important implications at the policy level:

> These reasons have implications for two policy orientations inherent in the charter school and special education. Whereas charter schools seek to eliminate or reduce bureaucracy to provide students and their families with an appropriate educational environment, special education seeks to ensure a free and appropriate education for all students through legislative regulation. Given the dichotomy of these two policy

> perspectives, the reasons parents choose a less bureaucratic setting may provide insight into their experiences in traditional schools and inform policymakers and practitioners alike (p. 142).

While few studies have examined parental reasons for placing students with disabilities in charter schools (Hawkins-Pammer, 2000; Lange & Lehr, 2000), those that have indicated high levels of parental satisfaction with charter schools. Additionally, these studies have indicated that parents of children with disabilities who placed their children in charter schools had a high level of dissatisfaction with their previous traditional public schools (Lange & Lehr, 2000; Hawkins-Pammer, 2000).

Noting the lack of research on special education students in charter schools and the reasons why parents placed their children in those schools, Hawkins-Pammer (2000) conducted a survey of parents of disabilities in two charter schools in each of the following states: California, Arizona, Florida, Colorado, and Michigan. Results of that study indicated most parents cited dissatisfaction with their former school as the main reason they placed their child in a charter school (Hawkins-Pammer, 2000). Their complaints mainly centered on academic features of the previous school. These same parents reportedly were generally satisfied with all features of their current charter school, except for transportation, and the five main features that influenced them to transfer to the charter school were: class size, academic programming, peer interactions, a nurturing environment, and the curricular focus of the new school (Hawkins-Pammer, 2000).

Similar results were found in a study of parents of students with disabilities in Minnesota charter schools (Lange & Lehr, 2000). In that study parents of students with and without disabilities responded to a survey covering parental satisfaction with the

charter school and reasons for transfer. Survey responses were subjected to a quantitative analysis and responses written in by parents were analyzed qualitatively. Results of that study indicated that 72 % of the parents who responded reported greater satisfaction with the special education services at the charter school and 61 % of the respondents reported a greater availability of special education services there (Lange & Lehr, 2000). Additionally, at least 90 % of the parents of students with disabilities reported being satisfied with the following aspects of a charter school: teachers, curriculum, school administrators, academic expectations of the students, home-school communication, parent involvement, support services, and student discipline (Lange & Lehr, 2000). However, all parent comments in the area of transportation at the charter schools were reportedly negative. Results were similar to the Hawkins-Pammer (2000) study in that 80 % of parents of students with disabilities cited dissatisfaction with the previous school as the reason for the transfer (Lange & Lehr, 2000).

Researchers noted an interesting observation regarding parental perceptions of services for students with disabilities in the charter school. While parents reported that their children received a high level of special education services in charter schools, charter school directors generally reported that the charter schools were in fact offering fewer special education services than their traditional public school counterparts (Lange & Lehr, 2000). In fact, 88 % of the 16 charter schools studied did not have a special education teacher available to provide services (Lange & Lehr, 2000). Additionally, directors reported a more limited continuum of services available in the charter schools, as only 44 % of the schools indicated they had the ability to offer both resource room services as well as serving students with disabilities in the general education classroom with a special education teacher (Lange & Lehr, 2000).

The study authors noted that the discrepancy between parent perceptions and the reality of services available raised some "interesting questions about what parents consider important" (Lange & Lehr, 2000, p. 150). "Survey responses and comments from parents of students with disabilities who attend charter schools suggest that parents may be interpreting 'good service' as one where their child receives individual attention, and staff members respond to their concerns and needs" (p. 150).

Charter Schools in Texas

As noted earlier, state charter school legislation began in 1991 in Michigan with the enactment of the first charter school statutes. Other states quickly joined the charter school movement and the Texas Legislature followed the national trend in 1995 by enacting Senate Bill One, which provided for the creation of charter schools in the state (Texas Center for Educational Research, 1997). In 1995, Texas was one of 26 states with charter school legislation on the books (Koppich, 1997).

The Texas statute allows for the creation of four types of charter schools in the state: home-rule school district charters, campus or campus program charters, college or university charters, and open-enrollment charters (Texas Education Agency, 2002). According to the Texas Education Agency Web site, there are no schools operating under home rule or college or university charters (2002). While the boards of trustees of several independent school districts in the state have granted campus or campus program charters, most of the charter schools in Texas operate under open-enrollment charters (Texas Education Agency, 2002). Open-enrollment charters are granted by the State Board of Education to one of the following entities: an institution of higher education, a governmental entity, or a non-profit corporation that has tax exempt status under section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code (Texas Education Agency, 2002). These charter

schools are “public schools that are substantially released from state education regulations and exist separate and apart from local independent school districts” (Texas Center for Educational Research, 1997, p. 7).

According to the Texas Education Agency Web site, the majority of open-enrollment charters have been awarded to non-profit corporations, but several open-enrollment charters also have been granted to universities and governmental entities (2002). Under statutory requirements the State Board of Education may not grant more than 215 open-enrollment charters. There are about 200 open-enrollment charters active in the state but some of those charters authorize the operation of more than one campus. While the term of the charters is not indicated in the statute, “the practice has been to initially grant open-enrollment charters for a five-year period and then to renew the charters for a ten-year period” (Texas Education Agency, 2002).

History of Texas Charter Schools

Since charter schools are a relatively new phenomenon in Texas, limited research has addressed their impact. However, a handful of writers have described the historical evolution of charter schools in the state of Texas (Ellisor, 2001; Fusarelli, 1998; Robertson, 1997).

Fusarelli (1998) utilized a case study method, which involved interviewing participants in the political process of the enactment of charter school legislation in Texas and examining legislative documents and testimony along with newspaper and journal articles. His findings indicated that the charter school movement in Texas followed the national trend and that limited consideration was given by the Texas Legislature to the existing research on the problems or effectiveness of existing charter schools. Charter school legislation passed in Texas because it was supported by a broad-based bipartisan

political coalition of influential Democrats and Republicans, including former Texas Governors Ann Richards and George Bush, and there was a lack of organized opposition to charter schools. While there was a great deal of support for charter schools in general, conflict arose over how charter school legislation should be structured. Vouchers, another school choice measure, did not have the broad support that charter schools gained, encountered vocal opposition from some advocacy coalitions, and were not approved by the legislature (Fusarelli, 1998).

During the legislative process proponents of charter schools were highly critical of public schools in the state and touted charter schools as a way of promoting competition and innovation, reducing bureaucracy, and supporting parental choice in the Texas educational process (Fusarelli, 1998). Advocates of charter schools had little positive to share regarding traditional public schools in the state. "The 'dialogue' was decidedly one-sided, so one-sided in fact that both Republicans and Democrats seemed to agree for reform" (Fusarelli, 1998, p. 61) despite the fact that student performance on statewide exams had been improving steadily.

When the statute passed in 1995, it allowed for 20 state-approved open-enrollment charter schools and an unlimited number of district-approved charters (Ellisor, 2001). But, in 1997, without waiting for data on the performance of the first generation of open-enrollment charter schools, the Texas Legislature authorized 100 additional open-enrollment charters and an unlimited number of charters if at least 75 % of the students were at-risk (Ellisor, 2001). At the time these additional charters were approved, "the Texas Education Agency had only 2.5 full-time employees to oversee the existing schools and was not given oversight funding or more authority to hire more oversight

employees" (Ellisor, 2001, p. 48). This increase in the number of charter schools without data on performance was attributed to political pressure (Ellisor, 2001).

By the year 2001, 18 charter schools had either surrendered their charters or they were revoked by the state (Ellisor, 2001). That year, responding to concerns regarding some of the charter schools in the state, the Texas Legislature amended the education code to eliminate the 75 % rule and cap the number of charter schools that the State Board of Education may grant at 215 (Weiher et al., 2002). The statutory changes allowed an unlimited number of specialized charter schools if public senior colleges and universities sponsored them.

While a few writers have examined the history of charter schools in the state, the most substantial body of research on charter schools in the state of Texas to date has been conducted jointly by researchers from the Center of Urban and Public Affairs at the University of Texas at Arlington, the Texas Center for Educational Research and the Center for the Study of Educational Reform at the University of North Texas, and the Center for Public Policy at the University of Houston. These researchers comprised a charter school evaluation team designated by the State Board of Education to jointly evaluate charter schools in the State of Texas. Their research was designated pursuant to a statutory mandate that the Commissioner of Education would select "an impartial organization with experience evaluating school choice programs to conduct an annual evaluation of open-enrollment charter schools" (Weiher et al., 2002, p. 3).

According to the most recent evaluation, the research team considered students' scores on assessment instruments, attendance, grades, discipline, and socioeconomic data on their families. Additionally, researchers examined parent and student satisfaction with the charter schools, the effect of charter schools on school districts and teachers, and costs

incurred by the charter school for instruction, administration, and transportation (Weiher et al., 2002). The methodology consisted of surveys of charter school parents, directors, and students, an analysis of student performance on the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills, as well as data from the Texas Education Agency's Public Education Information Management System and Academic Excellence Indicator System. Researchers also surveyed officials in traditional public schools that were affected by the presence of a charter school and analyzed Texas Assessment of Academic Skills test scores with a comparison group of traditional public school students (Shapley, Benner, & Stamman, 2002). Since the evaluation team studied charter schools for five years, each annual evaluation included comparisons with previous years.

Characteristics of Texas Charter Schools

The charter school evaluation team determined that charter schools have dramatically increased in numbers and student population since the first generation of charter schools opened in 1996. At that time there were 17 charter schools in operation with 2,498 students enrolled and an average campus enrollment of 147 students. By the 2000-2001 school year, there were a total of 200 charter schools in operation serving a total of 37,696 students with an average campus enrollment of 188 (Weiher et al., 2002). Despite the tremendous growth in charter school enrollment, these totals represent a very small percentage of the approximately 4 million students in public schools in the state of Texas (Weiher et al., 2002). At the time of the last study, the State Board of Education had revoked 5 open-enrollment charters and 18 schools had returned their charters.

An examination of types of charter schools in the 2000-2001 school year revealed that one third of the campuses served 75 % or more at-risk students and the remaining two thirds of campuses served a lower percentage of at-risk students. Additionally,

researchers determined that most charter schools had been in operation for a short period of time, with three fourths of charter campuses in operation for only two years. Also, the majority of charter campuses (84 %) were found in start-up rather than conversion charter schools (Weiher et al., 2002).

Researchers found striking differences between the racial/ethnic distribution in charter schools and traditional public schools when they examined student demographics. In school year 2000-2001, 40 % of students in charter schools were African American as contrasted to 14.4 % statewide, 37.3 % of students in charter schools were Hispanic in comparison with 40.6 % statewide, and 20.4 % of students in charter schools were White, compared with a state average of 42 %. Researchers noted that charter schools which had been in operation four or more years had a higher percentage of students who were Hispanic and that newer charter schools had greater percentages of students who were African American. However, the data indicated that African American students had consistently been over-represented in charter schools and, by 2000-2001, Hispanic students were slightly under-represented (Weiher et al., 2002).

Additionally, students with disabilities and students who are limited English proficient were under-represented in charter schools when compared to state averages. In the 2000-2001 school year, 7.8 % of charter school students were classified as needing special education services as contrasted with the state average of 11.9 % and 3.9 % of charter school students were limited English proficient as compared with a state average of 14.1 % (Weiher et al., 2002).

Also, researchers examining the data on charter school staff found that 12 % of the staff of charter schools was administrative as compared with 3 % in traditional public schools and that both administrators and teachers average salaries were lower than their

traditional public school counterparts (Weiher et al., 2002). Further, teachers in charter schools tended to be less experienced, with 21 % of charter school teachers classified as beginning compared to 8 % statewide. Charter school teachers generally were found to have about half as many years experience as their counterparts in traditional public schools (Weiher et al., 2002).

Finances were another area studied by the evaluation team, which found that open-enrollment charter schools received the largest bulk of their funding from the state and the least amount of revenues from federal or other funding sources. Schools that served at-risk students received slightly higher total revenues per pupil than schools that served less than 75 % at-risk students and generally the greatest per pupil expenditures were in the area of instruction (Ausbrooks, 2002). When data from different programs were examined, researchers found that considerably less was being spent on students with disabilities in charter schools than their statewide counterparts (Ausbrooks, 2002). According to per pupil breakdowns by program during the 2000-2001 school year, charter schools spent an average of $381 in per-pupil program expenditures for students with disabilities as contrasted with $632 statewide.

Charter School Directors

A survey of charter school directors revealed that funding was the number one challenge they faced in opening charter schools (Taebel & Daniel, 2002). These directors noted that inadequate facilities followed as a secondary challenge in opening charter school campuses. By the time charter schools had been in operation for at least two years, directors had moved inadequate facilities to the front as their biggest problem with lack of planning time coming in second. Inadequate operating funds were listed third in the

list of challenges at that time followed by Texas Education Agency regulations and the repayment of state aid overpayments (Taebel & Daniel, 2002).

The survey of charter school directors also revealed that realizing an educational vision and serving a special student population were the most important reasons for founding a charter school (Taebel & Daniel, 2002). Governance of charter schools resembled traditional public schools with an average of seven board members. Charter school boards averaged 2.4 teachers and 2.4 parents, with the number of parents and teachers serving as board members increasing over time. Researchers noted that school boards included an average of three African Americans, two Hispanics, and one Asian American but warned that those figures might create a false impression of racial diversity as some boards were composed of a single race or were mainly one race (Taebel & Daniel, 2002). Surveys revealed that the majority of charter school boards had adopted by-laws and approved operating policies and a budget.

Researchers also examined the level of support that charter schools received from parents, educational organizations, businesses, and the community. Parental participation was most likely to take the form of fundraising and participation in community projects while educational support was most likely to be provided to charter schools by regional educational service centers and the Texas Education Agency. However, charter schools serving primarily at-risk students indicated greater support from the Charter School Resource Center of Texas. Charter schools also reported receiving business and community support in the form of donations of equipment and time (Taebel & Daniel, 2002). Researchers concluded that charter school directors tended to be a highly educated group as about 54 % had master's degrees, 16 % had doctorates, and about 3 % had law

degrees. Only about 4 % of charter school directors had earned less than a bachelor's degree.

Charter school directors also reported on their use of curriculum materials and overall 94 % used state-adopted curriculum although about 82 % also used other curriculum materials. Researchers commented, "Although the additional curriculum materials offered by charter schools may differ from that offered in a particular local public school district, for the most part, the practices employed by charter schools exist in some traditional public schools" (Taebel & Daniel, p. 37). Researchers further observed, "It may be that charter schools offer curricula choices not available locally, but this curriculum is likely to exist elsewhere in the state" (p. 37).

Overall, charter school directors said they utilized mainstreaming, technology, and individualized learning as the top three educational practices. However, charter schools serving a population of more than 75 % at-risk students used more simulations, after school scheduling, and nontraditional yearly and weekly schedules than charter schools serving a lower percentage of at-risk students. However, these charter schools tended to use less individualized learning (Taebel & Daniel, 2002).

Besides instructional approaches, charter school directors also reported on discipline issues and incidents in their charter schools. Overall, they reported spending about 17 % of their time on student discipline although directors in charter schools serving at-risk students reported slightly less, at about 15 %. Teachers in charter schools spent less time on discipline issues than administrators (about 13 %) and that figure declined from about 18 % in 1998. Also, about 79 % of charter school directors characterized the discipline issues as not very serious. An examination of reports of disciplinary issues in schools

revealed that the number of disciplinary incidents in charter schools serving students who are at-risk had decreased since 1998 (Taebel & Daniel, 2002).

While much of the opposition to charter schools has centered on their feared negative impact on traditional public schools, the largest percentage of charter school directors (about 36 %) reported cooperative relationships with local school districts, about 28 % reported neutral relationships, and about 26 % said the relationships were somewhat cooperative. Only about 8 % of charter school directors reported hostile relations with traditional public schools in the 2000-2001 school year. However, researchers noted that charter schools serving higher percentages of at-risk students were more likely to report difficult relationships with their traditional public school neighbors. Almost 12 % of the directors in that category characterized their relationships as hostile and about 29 % described the relationship as neutral (Taebel & Daniel, 2002).

Charter school directors also reported on their relationship with parents. Overall, directors indicated that parents' greatest area of participation in charter schools was as volunteers followed by their involvement in parent-teacher meetings, and regular parent meetings (Taebel & Daniel, 2002).

Finally, charter school directors described the enrollment patterns and efforts to recruit students to their schools, indicating that on an average about 80 % of the students enrolled in 2000-2001 returned the following school year although directors of charter schools serving predominantly at-risk students indicated a lower return rate of only about 75 %. However, researchers noted that when the return rate for all charter school students is examined over a three-year period, the average percentage of returning students has increased from about 66 to 80 %. Also, about 51 % of all charter school directors indicated a waiting list for the 2001-2002 school year (Taebel & Daniel, 2002).

Examining enrollment patterns, charter school directors noted the reasons students left charter schools. Overall, the largest percentage of students left charter schools because they received a high school diploma or passed the General Educational Development (GED) test (about 17 %) or they moved (about 17 %). When all reasons for leaving were combined, a total of 13,522 students left charter schools in 2000-2001, a number which was up from the 8,869 in 1998-1999. However, the total enrollment of students in charter schools in the state increased during that three-year span and researchers also noted that 47 % of the students who left had been enrolled in either criminal justice juvenile programs or attended an alternative charter school (Taebel & Daniel, 2002).

Since students choose to attend charter school, recruitment is part of maintaining enrollment. Overall, about 91 % of charter schools reported using word of mouth to recruit students with use of flyers coming in second at 62 % (Taebel & Daniel, 2002).

Student Satisfaction

Students in charter schools, responding to a paper and pencil survey, indicated that they tended to be satisfied with their experience in charter schools, with about 55 % giving their charter school a grade of either A or B. Of these students, 53% also indicated they were satisfied with their charter school experience while 31 % were very satisfied (Barrett, 2002).

Comparing their current school to their previous experience in a traditional school, students tended to rank the charter school as superior in several areas. A higher percentage of students found charter schools superior in providing smaller classes, caring teachers, good teachers, teachers who provide personal attention, and a principal who cared about his or her students (Barrett, 2002). Charter school students also tended to rank the charter schools as about the same as traditional schools in areas such as feeling

safe, feeling a sense of belonging, and the level of order in the classroom. There were some differences between charter schools serving predominantly at-risk students and other charter schools, however. For example, students in schools serving predominantly at-risk students tended to give higher marks to charters than traditional schools in areas such as providing interesting classes, offering a choice of classes, and being located close to home (Barrett, 2002).

Students also were asked if they would return to the charter school the following school year. About 44% of those students who were not graduating said they would return, about 34 % were undecided, and about 22 % indicated they would change schools (Barrett, 2002). However, students in schools mainly serving at-risk students indicated they were less likely to return to the charter schools. About 36 % of those students indicated they would switch schools, another 32 % said they would return to the charter, and approximately 32 % were undecided. Study authors cautioned, however, that several charter schools in this category serve adjudicated students and for them not returning to the school is an achievement (Barrett, 2002). Despite the fact that, overall, charter schools seem to receive strong support from their students, researchers noted, “Student satisfaction with charter schools has declined over the five years of the study” (p. 60).

Researchers also examined the reasons why students chose charter schools and their plans upon leaving school. Approximately 31 % of students in charter schools indicated that they made the choice to enroll in a charter school on their own, while about 28 % indicated attending the charter school was their family’s idea, and about 28 % said student and family made a joint decision. The main reasons that students indicated that they chose the school was the classes fit their needs better and they got more attention from teachers (Barrett, 2002). Following graduation from the charter school, about 43 %

of the students intended to attend a four-year college, about 12 % intended to get a job, and about 11 % planned to enroll in a community college (Barrett, 2002).

Parental Participation and Satisfaction

Telephone interviews were conducted of parents of students in charter schools and also of a comparison group of parents who had children in traditional public schools in areas that also had charter schools. Parents of students in charter schools indicated that they were most likely to learn of their child's charter school from friends or relatives. Parents in the comparison group who were aware of charter schools also were most likely to learn of the school in this manner. However, the majority of charter school parents in the comparison group each year indicated that they had never heard of charter schools (Weiher et al., 2002). Researchers observed, "The fact that a majority of respondents each year indicated that they had not heard of charter schools may be significant. It seems the public is not aware of open-enrollment charter schools even after the schools have been in operation for five years" (Weiher et al., 2002, p. 64).

Parents also indicated the school attributes that were the most important in enrolling their child in either a charter or traditional public school. Over the five years of the study parents indicated that high test scores, teaching moral values, and better discipline were the three main reasons they enrolled their children in charter schools. Comparison group parents were much more concerned about school safety, giving it the highest ranking in year five of the study followed by high test scores and teaching moral values. By contrast, parents of charter school students never ranked school safety higher than fourth in their list of school attributes (Weiher et al., 2002).

Charter school parents tended to give high marks to the charter schools. In year five of the study, about 62 % of charter school parents gave their charter school a grade of A,

about 28 % gave the school a B, about 6 % gave the school a C, about 2 % gave the charter school a D, and about 2 % gave it an F. This is in contrast to the ranking they gave their previous schools which they graded much lower overall. About 23 % of charter school parents gave the previous school an A, about 35 % gave that school a B, about 22 % gave the school a C, about 11 % gave it a D, and about 9 % gave it an F (Weiher et al., 2002). Comparison group parents overall were not as pleased with the schools their children were attending. Only about 28 % of those parents gave their school an A, 43 % gave their school a B, about 19 % gave their schools a C, about 6 % gave the schools a D, and about 4 % gave their schools a grade of F. Additionally, when parents were asked to indicate whether they were very satisfied, somewhat satisfied, somewhat dissatisfied, or very dissatisfied with various characteristics of their schools, charter school parents indicated a much higher degree of satisfaction with every characteristic in the study than did their comparison group counterparts (Weiher et al., 2002).

Parents in charter schools not only were more pleased with their school choice than the comparison group, they also tended to participate in their children's schools to a somewhat higher degree than parents in comparison traditional public school settings (Weiher et al., 2002). For example, in year five of the study, about 60 % of parents in charter schools said they helped with fund-raising as compared with about 47 % of comparison group parents, about 59 % of charter school parents volunteered at school as contrasted with about 42 % of comparison group parents, about 41 % of charter school parents attended school board meetings as compared with 32 % of comparison group parents, and about 24 % of charter school parents helped make program decisions as compared with about 17 % of comparison group parents (Weiher et al., 2002). Both groups were fairly close in percentages of participation in the areas of attending parent-

teacher conferences (charter school parents at 80 % and comparison parents at 79.7 %) and attending parent teacher organization meetings (charter school parents at 69.4 % and comparison parents at 68.4 %).

Finally, parents were asked where their children would have attended school if they were not enrolled in the charter school. The largest percentage (about 66 %) indicated their children would have been enrolled in neighborhood schools, another 12 % reported their children would have attended private religious schools, and about 8 % said they would have attended magnet public schools. Additionally, about 6 % of the parents indicated they would have home schooled their children, about 5 % indicated they would have sent their children to a private non-religious school, and about 3 % of the children would have dropped out of school (Weiher et al., 2002).

Student Performance

Researchers used a variety of measures to determine student achievement in charter schools. They examined information provided by the Texas Education Agency data systems including the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) results, accountability ratings, retention/promotion rates, advanced course completion rates, end-of course examination passing rates, and student attendance and dropout rates (Shapley, Benner, & Stamman, 2002).

In examining campus-level performance, researchers noted that schools in Texas were rated under either the standard or alternative education rating systems (Shapley et al., 2002). Under the standard system, school districts and individual campuses received an annual accountability rating based primarily on student performance on the TAAS and the dropout rate. However, a campus that primarily served at-risk students could be rated under the alternative rating system. Campuses rated under that system were rated either

commended, acceptable, or needs peer review based upon their TAAS passing rate, annual dropout rate, and attendance rate. Additionally, campuses rated under the alternative education system were required to choose one of eight additional indicators to be rated on including GED test certificate completion, courses passed, and credits earned. Under the standard system districts could receive ratings of exemplary, recognized, academically acceptable, and academically unacceptable. Campuses under the standard system could receive ratings of exemplary, recognized, acceptable, and low-performing. The review of Texas Education Agency data indicated that during the fifth year of the study 61 % of charter school campuses were rated under the standard system as compared with 93 % of traditional public schools. In addition, 39 % of charter campuses were ranked under the alternative education system as compared with 7 % of traditional public school campuses. Campuses that were not rated were not included in the percentages (Shapley et al., 2002).

TAAS participation rates were considerably lower for charter schools overall than their counterparts in traditional public schools (Shapley et al., 2002). While 85 % of students in traditional public schools were included in the accountability rating system, only about 56 % of charter school students were included in the accountability subset. Researchers noted:

> The accountability subset includes students who were enrolled for the fall PEIMS 'snapshot' and tested in the same school. Charter schools' high student mobility and PID error rates may contribute to this variance with the state. In any case, low percentages of charter school students included in the accountability system undoubtedly impact campus performance outcomes (Shapley et al., p. 81).

An examination of campus performance ratings for charter schools under both the standard and alternative education systems indicated that overall they performed significantly below traditional public schools (Shapley et al., 2002). For example, under the standard system in 2001, 5 % of charter school campuses were rated as exemplary compared to 24 % in traditional public schools; 9 % were recognized compared to 36 % in traditional public schools; 42 % received an acceptable rating compared to 38 % in traditional schools; and 44 % were rated low-performing compared with 2 % in traditional public schools. Also, performance of charter campuses dropped under the standard rating system from 2000 to 2001. In 2000, 8 % of charter school campuses were rated as exemplary in contrast to 5 % in 2001, 11 % were recognized in 2000 compared to 9 % in 2001, and 49 % were rated acceptable in 2001 in contrast to 44 % in 2001. While the percentages of charter school campuses ranked exemplary, recognized, or acceptable decreased from 2000 to 2001, the percentage of charter campuses ranked low-performing increased from 32 % in 2000 to 44 % in 2001 (Shapley et al., 2002).

Charter school campuses likewise performed behind their traditional public school counterparts under the alternative education system (Shapley et al., 2002). In 2001, 2 % of charter school campuses using the alternative education ratings were rated commended as compared with 5 % of traditional public school campuses, 38 % of charter school campuses were rated acceptable as contrasted with 84 % of traditional public schools, and 61 % were ranked as needs review compared with 11 % in traditional public schools. While these ratings were significantly behind traditional public schools, from the years 2000 to 2001 charter school campuses did show an improvement under the alternative education rating system. In the year 2000 there were no campuses that received a rating of commended while in 2001 2 % received that rating. In 2000, 27 % of the charter

schools using that rating system were deemed acceptable and that percentage increased to 38 % in 2001. Finally in 2000, 73 % of charter school campuses received a rating of needs review while in 2001 that percentage had decreased to 61 % (Shapley et al., 2002).

In addition to examining campus ratings for charter schools, researchers analyzed TAAS performance for all charter schools against statewide averages. Again, charter schools scored considerably lower across all areas than traditional public schools (Shapley et al., 2002). An examination of percentages for all tests taken in 2001 revealed that about 47 % of students in charter schools passed all tests taken compared to about 82 % of students in traditional public schools-about a 35 % difference. Scores in subject areas also were significantly lower–with about a 19 % difference in reading, 27 % in writing, and 26 % in mathematics. Also, there was at least a 27 % difference in scores in all comparison groups when examined by ethnicity and economic disadvantage (Shapley et al., 2002).

Researchers also examined TAAS performance for the years 1999 to 2001. Although TAAS scores improved in charter schools from 2000 to 2001 across all areas "charter school averages are considerably below statewide passing rates, and the achievement gap between charter schools and traditional schools has not been substantially narrowed" (Shapley et al., 2002, p. 82).

In addition, TAAS performance also was examined for charter schools that had been in operation for four or more years. Those schools showed increases in scores across all areas in that time span but both charter schools serving predominantly at-risk students and charter schools serving fewer at-risk students fell considerably behind the state average. For example, there was about a 38 % gap behind traditional public schools in

TAAS scores from schools that served predominantly at-risk students and about a 23 % gap for other charter schools (Shapley et al., 2002).

Charter schools fared no better when the progress of students who had previously failed the TAAS was examined (Shapley et al., 2002). In charter schools serving predominantly at-risk students there was a 2001 pass rate in the area of reading of about 36 % for students who had failed the TAAS the previous year. By contrast, about 49 % of economically disadvantaged students statewide who had failed reading in 2000 passed in 2001, a difference of 12 %. In the area of math, the difference for charter schools serving mainly at-risk students was about 19 %. Charter schools serving fewer at-risk students had a higher overall pass rate, but still lagged behind the statewide averages by 11 % in reading and 18 % in math (Shapley et al., 2002).

An examination of 2001 advanced course completion and end-of-course passing rates for charter school campuses that enrolled students in the seventh grade or higher revealed that charter schools had lower advanced course completion rates regardless of the type of charter school and with only one exception charter schools also were behind in passing rates for advanced course completion (Shapley et al., 2002). Only in the subject of algebra did schools that served predominantly at-risk students have a higher pass rate–38 % compared to a pass rate of 36 % statewide for economically disadvantaged students (Shapley et al., 2002).

Finally, charter school campus attendance and drop out rates were compared to statewide figures (Shapley et al., 2002). The attendance rate for charter schools serving mainly at-risk students was 94 %; a figure only 1 % below the percentage for economically disadvantaged students statewide. Schools serving fewer at-risk students had a lower attendance rate of about 91 % compared to a statewide percentage of about

96 %. Dropout figures were higher at charter schools, with schools serving more at-risk students reporting a drop-out rate of 4 % as compared to a statewide rate of about 1 % for economically disadvantaged students. Charter schools serving fewer at risk students had an even higher drop out rate of about 5 % compared to a statewide rate of about 1 % (Shapley et al., 2002).

Student Results

Charter school researchers also examined the performance of charter school students (the student was the unit of analysis) in addition to looking at overall school performance (Shapley et al., 2002). They noted that charter school enrollment dramatically increased in the period from the 1997-1998 school year until 2000-2001. In the 1997 school year there were 1,606 students in charter schools in the state and by the 2000 school year that number had increased to 37,636. Also, more than twice as many students were served in charter schools serving fewer at-risk students (25,728) in school year 2000 than schools serving predominantly at-risk students (Shapley et al., 2002).

An examination of percentages of students in charter schools serving mainly at risk students revealed a trend toward higher percentages of students in charter schools serving predominantly at-risk students in schools that have been in operation one year (about 32 %) than those in operation four or more years (24 %) (Shapley et al., 2002). However, even in schools in operation for only one year, about 70 % of the students were served in charter schools which do not serve mainly at-risk students. So, despite a trend toward more students attending charter schools serving mainly at-risk students, the overwhelming majority of charter school students could be found in schools serving students who are not mainly at-risk (Shapley et al., 2002).

An analysis of student population by grade levels and retention rates revealed that the percentage of charter school students enrolled in each grade was similar to the statewide figures (between 6 to 8 % of students) until about the ninth grade when charter schools served a higher percentage of students in each grade throughout high school (Shapley et al., 2002). Researchers noted, however, that charter schools served a larger proportion of students in high school grades. Retention rates by grade in charter schools were within 1 % of those statewide except in grade one, where charter schools retained 1.6 % compared to 5.8 % statewide, and grade nine, where charter schools retained only 6.1 % compared to 14.2 % statewide (Shapley et al., 2002).

Using the student as the unit of analysis, researchers determined that there was not a large difference in student success on the 2000 and 2001 administration of TAAS in the subject areas of reading and mathematics between charter schools serving at-risk students and those with more advantaged students (Shapley et al., 2002). However, students in charter schools serving predominantly at-risk students scored about five % higher in the area of mathematics than students in charter schools serving fewer at-risk students. Additionally, researchers noted that pass rates for both types of charter schools approached state averages. Researchers cautioned, however, that data analysis of student performance was based on an examination of student performance over time and involved longitudinal student data covering 1999 to 2001, so the number of students in some of the comparison groups was small (Shapley et al., 2002).

When student scores were compared by grade level in 2001, pass rates increased as charter school students moved into advanced grades except for grades 6 and 10 in reading and grade 10 in mathematics (Shapely et al., 2002). Like their traditional public school counterparts pass rates tended to be lower in grades 3 and 6 in reading when compared to

other grades, although pass rates tended to be at least 10 % lower per grade than traditional public school scores in reading. In the area of mathematics, the tenth grade student pass rate for charter schools was 55.3 % versus 89.3 % for students in traditional public schools, a difference of over 20 percentage points. The third grade student mathematics passing rate of 50 % for charter schools was over 30 % less than the 83.1 % pass rate statewide. Mathematics passing rates tended to be at least 15 points behind statewide scores per grade (Shapley et al., 2002).

Further, when student TAAS passing rates were examined over years of charter school operation, researchers noted that larger gains in TAAS passing rates from 2000 to 2002 tended to be associated with the length of time the charter school had been in operation (Shapley et al., 2002). For example, students who had been in charter schools serving mainly at-risk students that had been in operation four or more years showed about a 26 % gain in scores in reading and about a 29 % gain in math. The percentage of gain was less for students in charter schools serving a lower percentage of students at-risk (Shapley et al., 2002).

Researchers also compared 2000 and 2001 percentage of passing TAAS scores for students attending charter schools that were either start-up schools or charter schools that converted from existing schools. The highest student passing rates were found to be in conversion charter schools serving predominantly at-risk students with pass rates of about 98 % in both reading and math in 2001–a score which was higher than state averages. By contrast, in charter schools serving fewer at-risk students, scores were higher in start-up rather than conversion schools and the lowest pass rates were found in start-up charter schools serving at-risk students (Shapley et al., 2002).

Finally, 2001 reading scores were analyzed for the four conversion charter schools serving mainly at-risk students. One charter middle school had by far the largest number of students tested (298) and a pass rate of 99 %. The lowest scores were in a charter high school which had 18 students tested and a pass rate of 15.4 %. Researchers cautioned that in terms of interpreting results where the student is the unit of analysis "outcomes for student-level data analyses may be heavily influenced by individual schools; thus, findings may not generalize to charter schools as a whole" (Shapley et al., 2002, p. 93).

Performance of Continuing and Moving Students

As part of the study of student performance, researchers examined TAAS scores as students either moved from public schools to charter schools or back to public schools during the years 1999, 2000, and 2001 (Shapley et al., 2002). They reached the following conclusions based on an analysis of those scores: "…it appears that continuous student enrollment in charter schools has a positive influence on academic performance, with students enrolled in charter schools in 2001 more likely to make gains in the second or third year of charter school attendance" and "students who moved to traditional public schools from charter schools generally had substantial TAAS gains upon returning for both reading (between 1 and 31 %) and mathematics (between 15 and 31 %)" (Shapley et al., 2002, p. 94).

Using the same transition patterns between charter schools and traditional public schools during the same time period, researchers found that attendance patterns generally followed TAAS trends. However, the study did find that elementary and middle school students who attended public schools in 1999 and 2000 showed about an 8 % increase in attendance when they transferred to the charter school in 2001 but their gain in TAAS scores was not as high. Researchers also noted that students who moved from public

schools to charter schools and back to public schools showed attendance rates of about 79 % in 1999, and 78 % in 2000, and then jumped inexplicably to about 96 % when the students returned to traditional public schools in 2001 (Shapley et al., 2002).

Finally, researchers examined the incidence of retention by grade level as students moved from traditional schools to charter schools and then returned to traditional schools (Shapley et al., 2002). Retention percentages in every grade level were significantly higher as students transferred from charter schools back to traditional public schools, although the percentages were not as high in grades 10, 11, and 12. However, there was a striking difference between retention percentages. For example, among first graders who transferred from traditional schools to charter schools, there was a 2.5 % retention rate. There was a 97.5 % retention rate when students in the same grade moved from charter schools to traditional schools. Researchers noted, "Clearly, most retentions occur when students move from charter to traditional schools" (p. 96).

An examination of all the performance data for students in charter schools in that study revealed that while there were some positive benefits in terms of student achievement in charter schools, (for example students who remained continuously in charter schools over a three-year period showed strong gains in TAAS scores) overall an analysis of student achievement was not promising. Researchers concluded:

> Taken as a whole, instances of strong student academic performance exist for charter schools, but overall outcomes favor traditional public schools. In general, if students in charter schools maintain their current rate of progress, they will require several years to reach state averages (Shapley et al., 2002, p. 100).

Effects on School Districts

Finally, researchers were required by statutory enactment to evaluate the effects of charter schools on school districts throughout the state (Benner, 2002). In fulfillment of this requirement, superintendents of traditional public school districts were surveyed if their district was located within the boundaries of a charter school. Charter schools were required by state regulations to indicate the geographic area from which they would draw students and to provide a Statement of Impact Form to every school district located in that area. During the first two years of the study, researchers conducted telephone surveys of superintendents in districts where charter schools were located using only open-ended survey items, but during the final three years of the study the surveys were mailed and contained mostly forced-choice responses (Benner, 2002).

Representatives from 181 traditional public school districts responded to the survey in 2001. An analysis of those responses indicated that a greater percentage of large and mid-sized districts responded to the survey and those responses generally were distributed throughout the state (Benner, 2002). The majority of responding districts (59 %) indicated that their district's enrollment was increasing, while about 24 % indicated that their enrollment was stable, and about 17 % described their enrollment as decreasing. Researchers noted that a greater number of responses from larger districts were to be expected since a higher percentage of charter schools are located in urban areas (Benner, 2002).

Researchers examined the number of charter schools near districts that responded to the survey and those that did not respond (Benner, 2002). Districts that responded to the survey tended to have more charter schools (an average of 3.8) within their boundaries than charter schools that did not respond (an average of 2.7). However, the majority

(about 81 % of respondents and 89 % of nonrespondents) had fewer than six charter schools within the geographic boundaries of their district. Responding districts also tended to be more likely to have a charter school serving fewer at-risk students in their boundaries since 93 % of responding districts indicated that they have a charter school serving less than 75 % at-risk students in their geographic area. However, only 39 % of responding districts indicated that a charter school serving mainly at-risk students was nearby. Researchers again noted that these figures were to be expected since the majority of charter schools mainly serve students who are not at-risk (Benner, 2002).

As a part of the survey of superintendents in districts that had at one or more charter schools within or near district boundaries, superintendents were asked if they were aware of the location of a charter school within their district's geographic boundaries (Benner, 2002). While all of the districts which were sent surveys in fact did have at least one charter school within their geographic boundaries, only 65 % were aware of the presence of those charter schools—leaving 35 % unaware of charter schools located within the boundaries of their district. Researchers speculated, "This could be due, in part, to the fact that some charter schools may have identified districts so far from the actual charter school location that district officials have not been aware of their presence" (Benner, 2002, p. 104).

Superintendents who were not aware of charter schools near their district only responded to questions regarding their perception of charter schools while those that indicated they were aware of the charter schools examined a variety of ways that charter schools could impact traditional schools including: general operations, budget and financial operations, educational approaches and practices, and effects on district

students. All survey respondents were asked to respond to questions regarding educator perceptions of charter schools (Benner, 2002).

Of the districts whose superintendents were aware of at least one charter school in their area, 30 districts (or 27 % of the districts aware of charter schools in their area) reported some level of contact between the district and the charter school during the 2000-2001 school year. The most frequent form of contact was observing a charter school classroom followed by interactions during regional/state meetings or training sessions and events sponsored by the local education service center (Benner, 2002).

Researchers' further examination of whether students had left traditional public schools for charter schools revealed that 58 of the 113 districts aware of charter schools within their boundaries indicated that some of their students had transferred to charter schools, 31 districts indicated they were unsure, and 24 districts indicated their students had not transferred to charter schools. Largest districts were the most likely to have indicated that some of their students had transferred to charter schools (Benner, 2002). Among those districts that reported charter schools in their geographic area 61 (55 %) reported that students from charter schools had transferred from or returned to their district, 22 (19 %) indicated that no charter school students had transferred from or returned, and 30 (26 %) were not sure. Again, administrators from larger districts were more likely to report charter school students transferring from or returning to their districts (Benner, 2002).

Administrators also were asked if their teachers had left the district to teach in charter schools. Mid-sized districts (3,000-9,999 students) reported the largest loss of teachers with about 17 % of the districts that size that were aware of charter schools in their district indicating that they had lost teaching staff to charter schools. Overall, 80 districts

(or 70 % of respondents) indicated that they had not lost teaching staff, 24 of the districts (21 %) were unsure, and 11 (10 %) indicated that they had lost teachers to charter schools (Benner, 2002).

Researchers also analyzed recent changes in district operations that were influenced by the presence of charter schools. In order of the frequency of occurrence, districts reported some of the following changes: increased communication with parents, promotion of parental involvement activities, improved responsiveness to parental needs and concerns, increased marketing to inform parents of district programs, the tracking of students leaving for or returning from charter schools, and a comparison of district student achievement with charter schools (Benner, 2002). Among these changes, comparing district student achievement with the charter school, tracking students leaving for or returning from charter schools, and increased marketing to inform parents of district programs were most likely to have been influenced by the presence of charter schools in the school district (Benner, 2002). Additionally, researchers found:

> Large districts are significantly more likely to report increased marketing to inform parents of district programs than mid-size or small districts, and mid-size districts are more likely to report instituting this change than small districts. Significantly more districts with decreasing enrollments report tracking students leaving for or returning from charter schools in comparison to districts with stable or increasing enrollments. Similarly, districts with declining enrollments more often report improving responsiveness to district parents' needs and concerns (Benner, 2002, p. 108).

Further, an impact on budget and financial operations was reported by about 70 % of administrators that were aware of a charter school near their district. The loss of average daily attendance (ADA) funds was the most frequently noted financial effect with 70 %

of respondents citing it as a budgetary impact. All districts that reported losing at least $1 million in ADA (6 districts) had a student enrollment of more than 10,000 and had more than 10 charter schools nearby. Also, 50 % of the responding districts reporting ADA losses (15 districts) indicated they lost between $100,000 to $750,000 (Benner, 2002).

In addition to a loss of ADA funds, respondents also noted financial impacts of reduced federal funding (reported by about 31 %), that changing enrollments made budget estimates for personnel difficult (about 19 %), and the district had to downsize teaching staff (about 19 %) (Benner, 2002). A lower percentage of respondents noted the need to downsize administrative staff (about 9 %), a reduced need to build additional schools (4 %), the need to close schools (about 1 %), and other financial impacts (about 7 %). Among the other financial effects reported were: charter school closures, students leaving the district to attend charter schools, and charter school failure to pay for services rendered by the district. Researchers noted that districts with decreasing enrollments were much more likely to report problems with losses in ADA and federal funds and decreases in teaching and administrative staffs while districts with either stable or increasing enrollments were less likely to report a financial impact (Benner, 2002).

School districts also examined recently implemented changes in educational approaches and whether those changes were influenced by the presence of nearby charter schools (Benner, 2002). Interestingly, the educational approaches reported by a higher percentage of districts were less likely to have been implemented because of charter schools in the area. For example, about 69 % of districts reported expanding current educational programs but only about 2.5 % said this change was influenced by charter schools, about 66 % of the districts said they had developed new educational

programs but only about 5 % cited charter schools as a factor influencing that change, and about 61 % expanded or changed curricular offerings but only about 4 % said charter schools were a factor in the change. By contrast, 16 districts increased class size with 25 % of those districts attributing the change to charter schools. Also, 6 districts established campus charters but only 2 of those districts said that area charter schools influenced the change. Researchers also noted differences in changes implemented based on district size. For example, no small districts opened campus charter schools but five large districts did and mid-sized districts were more likely to change the school's organizational structure (Benner, 2002).

Twenty-one school districts reported that the presence of a charter school had an effect on students in the district. Twelve of those districts (about 57 % of the districts indicating an impact) indicated that at-risk students were informed about alternative learning programs in charter schools, 8 districts (about 38 %) said students were informed about special charter school programs or practices, and 6 districts (about 27 %) said that teachers or administrators informed students about opportunities at charter schools. Five of the districts (or about 24 % of the districts indicating an impact) reported other effects on district students (Benner, 2002).

All of the 181 school district superintendents that responded to the study, including those who were unaware of charter schools near their districts, indicated their perceptions of charter schools. Districts were most likely to be concerned with the quality of instruction in charter schools (about 77 %) and grading standards (about 61 %). About 61 % of responding superintendents believed that charter schools have provided alternatives for dissatisfied parents but about 56 % worried that students with disabilities in charter schools might not be receiving an appropriate education (Benner, 2002).

Finally, when traditional public school district administrators were offered an opportunity to make additional comments about charter schools, the largest number (27) indicated a concern about the educational quality of charter schools and a slightly smaller number (23) noted their concerns with the financial accountability of charter schools. On the other hand, 8 school districts made positive comments about charter schools and another 8 indicated that charter schools have had no impact on their district. A smaller number of school district administrators expressed concerns regarding staff in charter schools and charter school governance and administration (Benner, 2002).

Special Education in Charter Schools in Texas

While research is limited on special education in charter schools (Maughan, 2001), even less research has been conducted on special education services in charter schools in the state of Texas. The five-year study of charter schools in Texas did not specifically address special education issues. However, statistics compiled by researchers indicated that in the 2000-2001 school year students with disabilities were underrepresented in Texas charter schools when compared to state averages, with 7.8 % of charter school students classified as needing special education services as contrasted with a state average of 11.9 % (Weiher et al., 2002). Additionally, charter schools were found to be spending less on students with disabilities than their traditional public school counterparts. According to per pupil breakdowns by programs during the 2000-2001 school year, charter schools spent an average of $381 in per pupil expenditures for students with disabilities as contrasted with $632 statewide (Weiher et al., 2002).

One study (Maughan, 2001) that specifically sought to determine how well Texas charter schools were serving students with disabilities determined that charter schools in Texas showed considerable variability in the provision of special education services. The

researcher analyzed data from a variety of sources including surveys of staff, administrators, and parents of students with disabilities, a review of charter school applications, and an examination of data on charter schools generated by the Texas Education Agency (Maughan, 2001).

After examining 164 charter school applications to determine the degree to which they provided information on how the charter school would provide services for students with disabilities, Maughan (2001) found that many of the earlier charter applications simply did not address special education issues. Only 43 % of the early applicants indicated they would provide special education services and an IEP and some charter school applications indicated that all students would be placed on a program developed individually for each child in the school rather than an IEP approved by an admission, review, and dismissal (ARD) committee.

However, during the two years after the Texas Education Agency revised the application process to include information regarding special education, Maughan (2001) found that applicants have included policies and procedures for students with disabilities. However, even with the revisions in the application process, Maughan noted:

> Services to expelled students, transition planning, and notice of admission, review, and dismissal meetings were not addressed by over seventy percent of the schools indicating a need for further training in this area. The area of least restrictive environment was inadequately answered by the highest number of schools indicating that there may be some confusion as to the expectations in this area (2001, p. 36).

Maughan (2001) also examined surveys of staff and parents of students with disabilities in the 41 charter schools that agreed to participate in the study. However, the return rate for her survey instruments was low. She examined 55 staff surveys that were

returned from 12 charter schools in Texas and found that most respondents were satisfied with the special education services being provided to students in their schools. All of the staff respondents indicated that to the maximum extent appropriate opportunities were provided for students with disabilities to interact with their peers without disabilities. Additionally, over 80 % of the staff gave positive ratings in the areas of confidentiality, assessments for establishing eligibility, notice of ARD committee meetings, development and implementation of the IEP, and least restrictive environment (Maughan, 2001).

Assessing positive features of the special education program, staff respondents listed small class size, the knowledge of current staff, and the provision of individual assistance as the three main strengths (Maughan, 2001). When asked to determine areas where additional training was needed, about 58 % of respondents indicated that training was needed in the area of behavior management, about 53 % indicated needs in the area of reading strategies, and about 45 % indicated that training was needed in the area of math strategies. The three areas of concern most frequently indicated were a need for more certified special education staff (47 %), more knowledgeable staff (36 %), and the provision of greater individual assistance (about 31 %). Further, 60 % of respondents indicated that additional funds to provide individual services were needed, 53 % cited a need for additional training for regular staff, and 42 % of respondents thought additional counseling services would be beneficial (Maughan, 2001).

Again, a limited sample of parents of students with disabilities responded to Maughan's survey. Twenty-eight parents from 12 charter schools returned the paper and pencil survey forms. These parents generally gave high marks to charter schools for the services they were providing to students with disabilities. In a finding paralleling information from staff surveys, all responding parents also indicated that they believed

that their children were being educated with their peers without disabilities to the maximum extent possible and all responding parents also felt that their child's charter school had maintained the confidentiality of their child's records. Further, at least 80 % of the parents gave their child's charter school positive marks in the areas of confidentiality, procedural safeguards, notice of ARD committee meetings, development and implementation of the IEP, least restrictive environment, transition planning, and personnel (Maughan, 2001).

When asked to identify education program strengths and concerns, about 93 % of parents noted small class size as a strength, about 71 % cited interpersonal skills of the staff, and about 68 % noted the individual assistance provided for students as an area of strength (Maughan, 2001). Ironically, although about 68 % of responding parents cited provision of individual assistance as a strength of their school, about 54 % listed the provision of more individual assistance as an area of concern or change. About 32 % of responding parents indicated a need for additional certified staff and about 29 % wanted more consistent implementation of the IEP (Maughan, 2001).

Additionally, Maughan (2001) analyzed records of focus-based data elements in special education compiled by the Texas Education Agency for 66 charter schools. Her analysis was limited to the charter schools for which education service centers provided the information. These data elements indicated how the charter schools compared with statewide numbers in 10 areas in special education: percentage of students in special education, disability categories, instructional setting, ethnic distribution, limited English proficiency, distribution of students who are economically disadvantaged, passing rates on the TAAS, TAAS exemption rates, placement of students in disciplinary alternative education programs, and the dropout rate. The Texas Education Agency rated each data

element zero through four based on how data submitted through PEIMS compared to districts throughout the state. High numbers indicated a greater area of risk. An analysis of the 66 charter schools revealed that most of the charter schools were not considered to be at a high risk level for the majority of the elements (Maughan, 2001).

However, 53 % of the schools analyzed were at a risk level 3 or 4 for data element 1, which examined the percentage of students with disabilities in a charter school when compared with the state median (Maughan, 2001). Both potential under and overrepresentation of students in special education are considered a risk factor according to the Texas Education Agency's analysis. Maughan (2001) noted that the percentage of students in special education in the charter schools analyzed varied from zero to more than 20 %.

Additionally, about 20 % of the charter schools analyzed were at a level 3 or level 4 for data element number 2 that examines the potential disproportion of ethnic populations served in special education (Maughan, 2001). A difference score was assigned based on the variance between the percentage of students in a particular ethnicity in special education compared to the percentage of all students in that ethnic group within the school as a whole. Ethnicities of White, Native American, Asian, African American, and Hispanic were examined. Finally, about 15 % of the charter schools analyzed were at a risk level of 3 or 4 on data element number 8, which examined the TAAS exemption rates for students with disabilities when compared to the state median (Maughan, 2001).

Maughan (2001) also examined the Texas Education Agency Snapshot 2000 for 145 charter schools. An analysis of that data revealed that 34 % of those charter schools had no students with disabilities and 62 % had a special education population of zero to 5 %. Additionally, 17 % of the charter schools analyzed had a higher percentage of students

with disabilities than the state average at that time of 12.1 %. Further, 81 % of those schools had no special education teachers on staff, 53 of the 145 schools had no budget for special education services and materials, and another 28 % had only allocated up to 5 % of their budget for students with disabilities (Maughan, 2001).

An analysis of administrator surveys from 66 charter schools revealed that 86 % of the respondents served students with learning disabilities, 52 % served students with speech impairments, 48 % served students who were emotionally disturbed, 36 % served students with other health impairments, 21 % served students with mental retardation and less than 10 % served students in other disability categories (Maughan, 2001). Also, 56 % of those respondents indicated that a general education teacher provided special education services, and about 29 % said a special education consultant provided those services. Only 12 % of respondents indicated that an educational diagnostician was used to provide special education services in the school (Maughan, 2001).

An analysis of accountability ratings for 176 charter schools in 2001 revealed that 23 % of those schools were considered low performing and another 19 % needed peer review (Maughan, 2001). At the other end of the spectrum, in 2001 5 % of the schools analyzed were recognized and 3 % were exemplary. Further, Maughan (2001) analyzed charter school complaints in the area of special education from January 1999 to December 2000 and found only six complaints in the area of special education and only one of those resulted in a corrective action. Finally, a review of special education hearing officer opinions from 1995 through September of 2001 revealed only one hearing involving a charter school in the state during that period. The hearing officer did find against the charter school that the student was not receiving the services designated in her IEP.

Maughan (2001) noted:

> Charter schools are under staffed and under budgeted to meet the needs of students with disabilities. Although some charter schools are contracting for services and others are developing cooperatives, there are students with disabilities not currently served by certified special education teachers (p. 82).

Finally, Maughan (2001) noted the small response on parent and staff surveys. One of the recommendations she proposed in response was "the need for additional data on parent and staff perceptions in additional charter schools throughout the state" (p. 83).

Conclusion

The review of literature examined the history and characteristics of the charter school movement, charter school legislation, and the national literature on students with disabilities in charter schools. The research on the history and characteristics of charter schools in the state of Texas then were analyzed along with the literature on students with disabilities in Texas charter schools.

The charter school movement has grown rapidly since the 1980's when Ray Budde first formulated the concept of chartering programs within schools. Since the first codification of charter school legislation in the Minnesota in 1991, the charter school movement has expanded to 37 states and the District of Columbia and currently over 2,000 charter schools serve more than 500,000 students in the United States. Charter school statutes differ from state to state making definitions of charter schools difficult and limiting the generalizability of state studies on charter schools.

Nationally, charter schools tend to be smaller than traditional public schools, generally have lower teacher-pupil ratios, and are more likely to have increased grade level configurations in one school. Despite the proliferation in charter schools nationwide they

still serve only a small percentage of the nation's public school students, as most states serve less than two % of their public school students in charter schools. As charter schools are a very new movement, limited research has been conducted on students with disabilities in charter schools. However, concerns raised in the literature are: accessibility, provision of required services in student IEPs, and students with disabilities being denied admission to charter schools or counseled to leave. While the examination of why parents of students with disabilities are placing their children in charter schools has been limited in the national studies, the research that has been done indicated high levels of parent satisfaction although at least one study noted an apparent discrepancy between the special education services parents reported to be receiving and the services they in fact received.

Texas joined the charter school movement in 1995 with the passage of Senate Bill One, which authorized the creation of 20 open-enrollment charter schools. Subsequent legislative enactments expanded the number of charters that the State Board of Education could grant. Later legislative enactments, responding to concerns about charter schools in the state, capped the number of open-enrollment charters at 215 and took steps to ensure greater accountability.

Literature on charter schools in the state of Texas is limited. A handful of writers have traced the history of the charter school movement that was supported by a bipartisan group of state legislators. By far the most expansive research on charter schools to date in Texas was conducted by researchers from the Center of Urban and Public Affairs at the University of Texas at Arlington, the Texas Center for Educational Research and the Center for the Study of Educational Reform at the University of North Texas, and the Center for Public Policy at the University of Houston. Results of their five-year study

revealed that by the fifth year of the study, charter schools had grown from the 17 open-enrollment charter schools in operation in 1996 to a total of 200 schools serving over 37,000 students statewide in the 2000-2001 school year. Researchers found that African American students tended to be overrepresented in the state's charter schools and White students were underrepresented. Parents and students in charter schools in the state reported high levels of satisfaction with the services they were receiving in charter schools and generally were less satisfied with the educational services they had received in traditional public schools. However, the charter school evaluation team found that traditional public schools outperformed their charter school counterparts on most measures of student achievement.

While the literature on students with disabilities in charter schools was very limited at the national level, it was even scarcer at the state level. The five-year study of Texas charter schools did not specifically address special education issues. However statistics compiled by researchers revealed that in the 2000-2001 school year students with disabilities were underrepresented in charter schools statewide and charter schools were found to be spending less on students with disabilities than their counterparts in traditional public schools.

One research study specifically examining outcomes for students with disabilities at the state level included results of surveys of administrators, staff, and parents of students with disabilities. These research findings were limited by a low rate of return on the surveys. While the reasons parents placed their children in charter schools were not examined, survey results indicated that generally parents of students with disabilities were pleased with the services their children were receiving in the state's charter schools.

Additionally, results indicated that most staff was satisfied with the special education services being provided in their schools.

In summary, while the charter school movement has swept the country and the state of Texas, very little is known about how children with disabilities are faring in charter schools. This is particularly true in Texas where research on charter schools is limited and research on students with disabilities in charter schools in the state is even scarcer. Although parental choice is a philosophical foundation of the charter school movement, no study in the state has examined the reasons parents of children with disabilities are choosing to place their children in charter schools. Qualitative studies have not been conducted allowing parents of children with disabilities to describe their perspective on the school choice decision, their experience with special education in charter schools, and how that experience differs from their experience in traditional public schools. In conclusion, the purpose of this study was to gather information on the parental perspectives of charter school experiences for students with disabilities in the state of Texas.

CHAPTER III: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Methodology

Qualitative methods have been advocated for an exploratory study (Patton, 2002). "Qualitative methods are particularly oriented toward exploration, discovery, and inductive logic," (Patton, 2002, p.55). Qualitative methods, then, with their orientation toward discovery were selected as the most appropriate methodology for a study to explore how parents of students with disabilities in Texas experienced charter schools given the limited information published in this area.

An additional strength of qualitative research is its emphasis on people's lives, which makes it suitable for determining the meaning study participants ascribe to certain events, situations, and actions in their individual worlds (Maxwell, 2005). Further, Mertens and McLaughlin (2004) noted that qualitative methods could be particularly appropriate for studies in the field of special education as "many of the criteria that establish the appropriateness of choosing qualitative methods parallel the conditions in special education" (p. 98). Besides their appropriateness for an exploratory study, qualitative methods were then considered the best method for discovering the meaning that parents of children with disabilities attached to their charter school experience.

This chapter outlines three main components of qualitative methodology: research design, data collection, and data analysis (Whitt, 1991). First, the section on research design describes the principles and techniques of grounded theory that guided this study. The next section on data collection describes the sampling procedures, instrumentation, and procedures to ensure the trustworthiness of the study. Also, this chapter describes the procedures for data analysis, including a discussion of the three major coding types delineated by Corbin and Strauss (1990).

Research Design

As described earlier, this study was guided by qualitative methods, which are particularly suitable for areas of discovery. For data analysis, the grounded theory approach was selected to provide a systematic measure of analyzing the data obtained from parents of students with disabilities in charter schools. Also, grounded theory was selected for its focus on building an explanatory theory which results from the findings. Grounded theory has been described as "an inductive strategy for generating and confirming theory that emerges from close involvement and direct contact with the empirical world" (Patton, 2002, p. 216).

Overview of Grounded Theory

Grounded theory originally was developed by sociologists Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In their 1998 text on grounded theory, Strauss and Corbin explained that grounded theory refers to "theory that was derived from data, systematically gathered, and analyzed through the research process" (p. 12).

The researcher using grounded theory begins with an area of inquiry and allows the theory to emerge (hence is grounded) from the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). "Grounded theories, because they are drawn from data, are likely to offer insight, enhance understanding, and provide a meaningful guide to action" (p.12).

Eleven canons and procedures were identified by Corbin and Strauss (1990) as underlying data collection and analysis in grounded theory. They are: (1) There is an interconnection between data collection and analysis as both simultaneously give direction and guide understanding. (2) Concepts form the basic unit of analysis. Conceptual labels are first given to incidents and events uncovered in the data then they are analyzed and compared. (3) Similar concepts are developed into categories and

compared to each other and then become the foundation of the theory. (4) Concepts of the phenomenon are represented in the sampling rather than people. The sampling is based on theoretical grounds. (5) Data analysis consists of a constant process of comparing concepts and categories. (6) Structure is provided to the analysis by the identification of similarities or patterns. (7) Phenomena are broken down into smaller stages during analysis. An examination of these stages brings process to the analysis. (8) The written recollection of analysis in the form of memos also is a key component of theory development. Memos are written from the first coding session and are written continuously as the research evolves. (9) During the process of data analysis, relationships among categories that evolve into hypotheses are continually verified. (10) The researcher consults with his or her colleagues regarding the research findings and analysis to guard against bias. (11) Broader conditions of the phenomena should be analyzed and incorporated into the theory. Each of these 11 procedures were used to analyze the data generated in this study.

Procedures for Data Collection

Sampling Procedures

Generally qualitative researchers work with small samples of people that are studied in-depth (Patton, 2002). Additionally, qualitative research samples are purposeful rather than random (Maxwell, 2005; Patton, 2002). Patton (2002) explained:

> The logic and power of purposeful sampling derive from an emphasis on in-depth understanding. This leads to selecting information-rich cases for study in-depth. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research, thus the term purposeful sampling (p.46).

Purposive sampling techniques guided this study. This study examined parents of students with disabilities that shared the following characteristics: (1) Only parents of children with disabilities that had attended a Texas charter school for at least one year were selected for study. This characteristic ensured that the parents had an opportunity to experience the impact of a charter school education on their child. (2) Parents had their child enrolled in a traditional public school prior to enrollment in a charter school. This ensured a basis of comparison between charter schools and traditional public schools. (3) Finally, parents must have had a child with a disability enrolled in a charter school in the state of Texas at the time of the study.

Two charter schools participated in the study. Both charter schools were located in a major metropolitan area in the state with a population over 500,000. For increased confidentiality that city was not named in the study, parents were identified by pseudonyms, and the names of the charter schools were not reported. Data from administrator interviews is provided in Appendix B.

Due to confidentiality requirements of the Federal Education Right to Privacy Act, school administrators identified parents of students with disabilities enrolled in each school that met the sampling requirements. This list was not shared with the researcher. The researcher initially asked the staff to contact parents that met the study's criteria in a random fashion to ensure that administrators did not ask only parents who were satisfied with the charter school to participate in the study. Staff from each school was provided with copies of letters translated in English and Spanish describing the study and stamped envelopes so they could be mailed to parents.

Obtaining parents who met the study criteria and were willing to participate proved difficult. One parent agreed to participate but twice failed to show up for the scheduled

interview. One parent missed the first interview date but participated in the second. Another parent first agreed to the interview but then declined to proceed after the study was explained in greater detail. By the conclusion of the study, staff/administrators at both schools reported attempting contact with all parents that met the criteria for inclusion in the study. Staff reported that some parents who met the sampling criteria declined to participate in the study and others could not be located. Every parent at both schools who met the sampling criteria and agreed to participate was interviewed by the researcher.

Prior to conducting interviews, the researcher explained the study to participants and answered questions as needed. All participants signed the consent form translated in English and Spanish prior to beginning the interviews. Interviews were conducted at a time, date, and location mutually agreeable to both researcher and participants. Both charter schools agreed to allow interviews in a room on the charter school campus. However, the researcher indicated that she would meet participants at a mutually agreeable location. Two of the parents preferred to be interviewed in their homes.

Staff/administrator interviews were conducted prior to parent interviews to provide background information for the study. These interviews were conducted in groups. Three staff/administrators participated at one school and two at the other school. All staff/administrator interviews were conducted on the charter school campus.

The first parent interview was conducted weeks before subsequent parent interviews. The researcher transcribed that interview, which was audio taped, and themes that emerged from that interview were used to guide subsequent interviews. Parents were interviewed until there was a saturation of themes. A total of six parents from two different charter schools participated in the study. These parents included four mothers of

Hispanic ethnicity, one Caucasian, and one African American. Among the disability categories parents reported in the six children were learning disabilities, emotional disturbance, and speech impairment. Also, one of the mothers also described her child as having Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), in which case this child may have been classified as other health impaired.

Instrumentation

In this section two instruments of qualitative research are discussed, the researcher and in-depth interviews. Patton (2002) noted that "the researcher is the instrument" (p.14) in a qualitative research study. As a result, the validity of the study depends to a large extent on the skills and competence of the person conducting the study.

As the instrument of this study, the researcher brings a background in special education, law, and journalism to the research process. The researcher's journalistic background provided her with experience in conducting interviews with persons from all walks of life and in a variety of settings. Further, the researcher's four years as a teacher of students with disabilities in a traditional public high school, middle school, and at the Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired increased her practical knowledge of special education and provided numerous experiences with parents of students with disabilities. Finally, the researcher's background knowledge was enhanced by five years experience monitoring school districts in the state of Texas for their compliance with state and federal statutes governing students with disabilities. In her employment as a special education monitor (employed by a firm which conducted special education monitoring under a request for proposal from the Texas Education Agency) the researcher monitored over 60 school districts in Texas, including 4 charter schools. This

position involved visiting classrooms, examining student folders, and conducting parent roundtable discussions throughout the state.

The in-depth interview was the second instrument used in this research. Patton (2002) noted that the purpose of open-ended interviewing is to determine the perspective of the interview subject. This study utilized an open-ended protocol questionnaire to guide the interview process. The protocol for the first interview was based on the researcher's knowledge and experience (see Appendix A). It was used to provide a framework for the first interview although the researcher followed up on parent comments and themes that emerged during the interview. Subsequent protocol questionnaires were developed based on an analysis of the data from the first interview and the protocol was continually adjusted throughout the interviewing process to reflect insights gleaned from the data.

The open-ended interviews were used to obtain the parents' perspectives on charter schools. Whitt (1991) explained that in-depth interviews are semi-structured conversations that both obtain the participant's perceptions regarding the phenomenon and confirm or expand information. This study utilized the data obtained from each of the six parent interviews and interviews with the five staff/administrators. As noted earlier, each interview was transcribed and analyzed by the researcher.

The researcher wrote field notes during and immediately following each interview. Patton (2002) explained that detailed, concrete field notes contain descriptions of what has been observed in the field. The field notes for this study contained such information as the physical setting of the interview, impressions of the researcher, and descriptions of both quotations from participants and the affective nature of the exchange. All field notes were dated and each participant was identified by a descriptive code to ensure confidentiality.

Trustworthiness

Lincoln and Guba (1985) established four criteria to ensure the trustworthiness of the data gathered in a qualitative study. These were credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. The researcher in this study utilized each of these to ensure trustworthiness.

The first criterion, credibility, was described by Miles and Huberman (1994) in terms of the truth value of the study. They asked the following questions: “Do the findings of the study make sense? Are they credible to the people we study and to our readers? Do we have an authentic portrait of what we’re looking at?” (p. 278). Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested a variety of techniques to ensure credibility in qualitative research. Those which were used in this study are prolonged engagement (the investment of sufficient time), triangulation (use of multiple sources), and peer debriefing. To ensure credibility, two peer reviewers reviewed the data, field notes, and memos. The researcher personally transcribed and analyzed all data gathered in the study. The duration of the parent and staff/administrator interviews varied, but generally lasted for about an hour at the discretion of the participant.

Transferability, the second criterion of trustworthiness in a qualitative study, was described by Lincoln and Guba (1985) as being very different from the concept of external validity in a quantitative study. In fact, they stated that generalizability in the strict sense used in quantitative analysis is impossible in a qualitative study. Miles and Huberman (1994) noted that in looking at transferability the questions arise as to whether the conclusions of a study have a larger import, are transferable to other contexts, and do they fit? Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested the use of thick description as a technique for ensuring transferability in a qualitative study.

Patton (2002) noted:

> …classic qualitative studies share the capacity to open up a world to the reader through rich, detailed, and concrete descriptions of people and places-'thick description' (Geertz, 1973; Denzin, 2001)-in such a way that we can understand the phenomenon studied and draw our own interpretations about meanings and significance (p. 275).

This study utilized thick descriptions of parental and staff/administrator perspectives to ensure transferability.

The third criterion for trustworthiness delineated by Lincoln and Guba (1985) was dependability. The issue underlying dependability is whether "the process of the study is consistent, reasonably stable over time and across researchers and methods" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 278). They noted that the main question is whether the study has been conducted with reasonable care. To ensure dependability, in addition to measures outlined earlier, the researcher in this study maintained a journal documenting decisions made by the researcher during the course of the study.

Confirmability, the final criteria for trustworthiness noted by Lincoln and Guba (1985), refers to whether the data in the study are confirmable. One of the questions posed by Miles and Huberman (1994, p. 278) for determining confirmability is "Is there a record of the study's methods and procedures, detailed enough to be followed as an 'audit trail?' "(Schwandt & Halpern, 1988). To ensure confirmability, the researcher in this study maintained an audit trail consisting of all materials and procedures employed during the study. All tapes, transcriptions, coding, consent forms, letters, and concrete forms of documentation have been maintained by the researcher with transcriptions coded to protect participant confidentiality. Further, the journal provided an audit trail of

the internal thoughts and decisions of the researcher. All these materials were maintained in a locked filing cabinet in the researcher's home office for the duration of the study.

Data Analysis

According to Strauss and Corbin (1998) data analysis is the interplay between the researcher and the data that takes place throughout the research process. As the study progressed, concepts and relationships emerged from the data through qualitative analysis. This information influenced the gathering of additional data that furthered the evolution of an explanatory theory. Since analysis of the data begins from the beginning of the study to guide further investigation, the researcher in this study began a formal process of data analysis following each participant interview and then used information from each interview to guide subsequent interviews.

Strauss and Corbin (1998) proposed three major types of coding of data in grounded theory: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. All three were used to guide data analysis in this study.

Open Coding

In grounded theory the process of analysis begins with open coding. Strauss and Corbin (1998) defined open coding as "the analytic process through which concepts are identified and their properties and dimensions are discovered in data" (p. 101). They explained, "During open coding, data are broken down into discrete parts, closely examined, and compared for similarities and differences" (p. 102). Interactions/actions or events that were conceptually similar or related in meaning then were grouped into more abstract concepts called categories. Categories then were developed in terms of their properties and dimensions.

Additionally, Strauss and Corbin (1998) identified three methods of conducting open coding: line-by-line analysis, analyzing whole sentences or paragraphs, or examining the document in its entirety asking, “What’s going on here?” and “What makes this document the same as, or different from, the previous ones that I coded?” (p. 120).

In this study the researcher transcribed each participant interview. Following transcription, the researcher repeatedly read each transcript. During the first reading the researcher became familiar with the data and the overall story told by each parent. During the second reading the researcher examined the document for words, phrases, and concepts that were repetitive during the interview. During subsequent readings the researcher performed coding according to the principals of grounded theory. During this process, the researcher analyzed each of the six parent interviews using procedures of open coding and concepts and categories developed from the first interview were used to guide subsequent interviews and analysis.

Axial Coding

The next step in the analysis process is axial coding, which was defined by Strauss and Corbin (1998) as “the process of relating categories to their subcategories, termed ‘axial’ because coding occurs around the axis of a category linking categories at the level of properties and dimensions” (p. 123). They explained that the purpose of axial coding is to begin reassembling data that were fractured during the process of open coding: “In axial coding, categories are related to their subcategories to form more precise and complete explanations about phenomena” (p. 124).

In axial coding categories are related to subcategories by their properties and dimensions. The researcher conducting axial coding examines how categories of data link and crosscut. Procedurally, Strauss and Corbin (1998) listed four different tasks that form

the basis for axial coding: (1) The researcher lays out the properties of a category and its dimensions. This task begins during open coding. (2) The researcher then identifies the multiplicity of conditions, actions/interactions, and consequences associated with the phenomenon. (3) The researcher relates the category to its subcategories through statements explaining how they are related. (4) The researcher seeks clues in the data that explain how major categories might relate to each other. The researcher in this study conducted all four tasks that form the basis for axial coding in analyzing the data in this study.

Selective Coding

The final step in the process of analysis, selective coding is the process of integrating and refining categories to form theory. Strauss and Corbin (1998) stated that the first step in integration is deciding on a core category that represents the main theme of the research. During the process of integration, categories of data are organized around the core category. This integration process occurs continually throughout the research process. Major categories are related to the core category through explanatory statements of relationship.

Strauss and Corbin (1998) explained that once the researcher has constructed a theoretical scheme it must be refined through a process of trimming off excess and filling in categories that were inadequately developed. Finally, the explanatory theory resulting from these efforts is validated through comparison with the raw data in the study. The researcher in this study used the steps of selective coding outlined above to create, refine, and validate a theory that identified the central idea of the phenomenon of this research study.

CHAPTER IV: RESULTS

Parents in this study spoke with much emotion about the educational journey of their children with disabilities. These six mothers related tales of tears and triumph, suffering and transformation, as their children moved from traditional public schools to charter schools in the state of Texas. This chapter reports the qualitative findings that emerged from the analysis of those individual stories. Each individual category or subcategory that emerged from that analysis will be presented in-depth later in this chapter. In this section, a storyline memo gives an overview of their stories using concepts and their linkages that emerged from analysis. That memo follows with categories italicized for emphasis.

Without exception, parents of students with disabilities in this study described a desperate situation facing their children in the traditional public school. All six parents reported that *their children's emotional and learning needs went unmet* in that environment. While some parents reported more positive experiences in elementary school, each child was struggling in school at the time of transfer. Parents in this study came from a variety of racial backgrounds and their children had different disabilities. Some of these children had faced difficult situations outside of school as well: living in a single-parent home, divorce, abuse. Regardless of the child's background or disabilities, every parent found that the traditional public school *did not meet the needs of their child.* All the children in this study experienced *social/emotional problems* in that setting. Children responded differently. Some became involved with the "wrong crowd" and got into trouble in school. Others became truant or acted out. A few children "shut down," refusing to participate in class or do their work. In addition to the emotional difficulties, all of the parents reported a *problematic learning environment* that failed to met the academic needs of their children. Five of the six parents stated that their children suffered

from *academic failure* in that setting. While parents related stories of children repeatedly failing classes and falling further and further behind academically, no parent in this study independently mentioned the statewide testing system in describing the overall achievement of their child. While the bulwark of the Texas school accountability system, parents described *statewide testing as less important than other variables* in describing outcomes for their children. Also, although all of the children in this study received special education services in traditional public schools, parents described those *special education programs as problematic or ineffectual* in meeting the needs of their children. At times children reportedly did not receive services or felt like they were being punished when removed from the general education classroom to receive special education services. Parents said sometimes general and special education teachers demonstrated a lack of understanding of disability conditions and became frustrated or critical of their child. At times traditional public school personnel demonstrated low expectations for the success of these children. Finally, dissatisfied with their children's circumstances, parents eventually reached a point where they concluded they *could not change the educational system* in their child's traditional public school to make it serve the needs of their sons and daughters. During this period of school failure and emotional struggle, all parents related that they had *limited or no knowledge of the charter school alternative*. Seeking educational solutions for their children, they learned of charter schools through friends, neighbors, church members, an educational association, and their child's traditional public school. Upon enrollment in the charter school, all parents reported an increased sense of emotional well being in their children. Parents noted that *size does matter* when it comes to positive outcomes for their children. They described a "welcoming atmosphere," greater attention for their child, better discipline, and a caring staff. All of

the parents reported that their children experienced increased *emotional well being* in that environment. Each of the children was happier and some made dramatic gains in self-esteem. Parents described more of a sense of community and higher levels of communication between parents and school. Not only were the children happier, but five of the six parents reported *academic improvement* as well. This growth was sometimes slower than the emotional gains, but parents noted passing grades, improvements in functional learning skills, and a burgeoning orientation towards higher education and careers. Sometimes parents reported a dramatic turnaround in the emotional and academic functioning of their child. Parents also reported *more attention in special education services* for their children. While all parents in the study commented favorably on charter schools and the positive impact of the smaller environment, four of the parents noted that *charter schools aren't perfect either***.** They said the transfer to charter schools meant giving up activities like prom and football. Sometimes it meant poorer facilities and a lack of resources like a school nurse. Parents attributed these deficits to reduced funding for charter schools. In the area of special education, some parents also struggled with teachers who lacked training in working with children with disabilities. Parents found this problem existed in both traditional public schools and charter schools as well. However, parents reported more influence in dealing with teacher attitudes in the smaller charter school environment.

In the following sections, findings are presented in detail with a description of each category that emerged from analysis and parent comments that supported that finding. The core category that emerged from analysis is presented first.

The Needs of the Child were not Being Met

Without exception, each of the six parents interviewed for this study reported that the traditional public school environment did not meet the needs of their child. Although these children had a variety of disabilities, racial backgrounds, and attended three different public school districts in the same metropolitan area, their educational circumstances varied only by degree. All parents in the study told essentially the same story: traditional public schools fell short in meeting both the emotional and academic needs of their children. Further, in every instance the situation had become desperate by the time the parent decided to remove their child from that setting. Looking back, one parent characterized the experience as "a nightmare" while another mother described her daughter's years of failure and emotional suffering as "this dark period in her life." The impact of the child's needs going unmet manifested in the categories of social/emotional problems and problematic learning environment/academic failure. These categories are closely interrelated as parents indicated that losses in one impacted the other in a downward spiral of emotional despair and academic under functioning.

Social/Emotional Problems

All of the parents in the study noted that their children experienced social/emotional problems in traditional public school. Under that category, an analysis of parental responses revealed three subcategories of an unhappy child/low self esteem, impaired peer relationships, and behavior problems. All six of the parents in this study reported that their children were unhappy in the traditional public school environment. Parents also reported deficits in self-esteem in their children, behavioral concerns, and problematic peer relationships. Some of the parents indicated disruptions in their own happiness and well-being as well.

An Unhappy Child/Low Self-Esteem

As noted above, each of the parents indicated that their children were emotionally unhappy while enrolled in traditional public schools. Parents did not always attribute this unhappiness completely to the school environment, noting that sometimes outside factors influenced the emotional well-being of their children. For example, two of the children in this study had been removed from their original family home. Four of the six students lived in a single family home. In addition, parents noted that other factors such as peer pressure, hormones, and adolescent angst contributed to the malaise. However, in each instance, the child did not thrive emotionally in the traditional public school environment. In some cases parents indicated that their child's anguish originated in direct response to the school setting.

The change in environments from elementary school to junior high school had a negative impact on one of the children in the study. Josie explained, "Well, we had a good background in traditional school, but then it shifted from elementary to junior high school, it went from coddling the children to actually like being in a military school." She elaborated:

> Well, every time you were like five minutes late the attendance teacher would be roaming the halls screaming at the kids, 'Get over here right now' and it was very abusive authority. And for a child to go from elementary, coddling type where the teachers are their kind of second mother to a militant type of abusive authority, I didn't think was fair.

Josie perceived the traditional public school as having "more of a disciplinary focus" with an emphasis on combating gangs and drugs. "I didn't think it was very healthy," she observed and said her son suffered emotional distress in this setting. "He didn't like it—

he was stressed out," she explained. Her son's relationship with his teachers deteriorated as well. "…He didn't like the fact that they were cruel to him, and that they wouldn't let him go to his special content mastery classes and they made him stay in class to do work," she observed. Describing the junior high experience as "a nightmare," she reported that her son didn't want to go to school and was restless at night dreading the upcoming school day. "He kept thinking about this one teacher that was mean to him. It's like, 'Why am I going to go to school if I am going to get yelled at?' "

Therese also reported that the disciplinary focus in traditional public school had a negative impact on her child. Describing his educational history, she said her son's problems surfaced in elementary school in response to his classroom setting. Diagnosed with a learning disability, her son was placed in what the school called a developmental first grade. She explained that "…what happened was that was a classroom with children with speech impediments, they had behavioral problems, a lot of ED (emotionally disturbed) students, and so it made his problem even more pronounced."

This classroom environment, setting the stage for later academic and emotional problems, negatively impacted her child according to Therese. "He was embarrassed. He felt ridiculed. He felt put down because he was in that classroom. It made him upset and he became ED also mostly because of anger with his own self…," she explained. Reflecting Josie's experience, she noted, "I found that the teachers at that point in the public school district viewed not only my son but others as mostly behavioral problems." In this environment, her son began to view himself as a failure. "You could see it in the way he behaved or how he spoke about himself," she explained.

Not only the child, but also the entire family was affected as well. She said:

I believe that a learning disability is just as devastating for a family as a physical

> disability. The problem is you can't see the learning disability so a lot of times the needs are not as addressed. There is not enough focus on them. If he was a child that couldn't walk, maybe I think they might have paid more attention to him in public schools, but what they don't realize is that not having their reading skills is just like not having their legs. And a lot of times I would say 'You don't understand that this is hard on him, not being able to focus and read, it is just like if I can't walk, you know.' And of course, being a young parent I was just overwhelmed.

When her son began having reading problems, "it really made a big impact on me and my life," Therese said. Since she had struggled with school herself, "I thought maybe I had done something wrong to him or maybe he got my bad genes or something. And my husband just wouldn't accept that it was the reading." She added, "He thought that maybe the teachers were right and he was just lazy and he kept trying to get something out of him, and with his work schedule he didn't ever go to ARDs with me." The conflict at home further impacted her son's behavior. She explained:

> "…I think that my child also perceived, I don't know how to say this, he actually knew that it was causing a division, like between his father and myself when he was younger and I think that all of that was manifested in his behavior.

This parent reported that the school did not offer support in dealing with the family's adjustment to the disability.

A background of abuse impacted the emotional well-being of a different child in the study, but Rachel reported that the public school environment did not promote her son's emotional healing. She described him as "very introverted" and suffering from low self-esteem during the period he attended a traditional public high school. "See, he was so abused that he had no self-esteem and he probably felt like, I am just saying from my

opinion, he was nothing, he was retarded," Rachel explained. During that period he would make remarks like " 'Oh, I am an animal—I am a dog.' " Further, she reported that he was on three different medications at that time.

While the traditional public school provided weekly counseling sessions, they proved ineffective. "They were giving him counseling but this kid has been in the system for many years" and "he would come home and laugh and say, 'Oh well, had therapy today, beat the teacher in Sorry, Ha! Ha! Ha!' " Rachel replied, "I was like, 'So that is what you did?' 'Yeah, she thinks she is getting to know me. So, I just play games with her and waste my time.' "

Another parent, Helena, also reported that her daughter received medication for emotional difficulties during the time she attended traditional public school. These emotional problems increased in that setting. Her mother explained:

> She had been going to the (traditional public school) and she had been getting into a lot of trouble because of her disability and in the junior school she was confined to only one classroom and a lot of the kids of the same. They picked on her and she would walk out of school during the day and show up at the house unexpected.

Helena said that her daughter dreaded school and "was very unhappy, I guess, because of the school and then she had personal problems on the side because she had to live with me." Again, the child's suffering impacted the family. She explained:

> She got hospitalized because of her disability and she would take all her anger out on me at the house. She would push me. There was one time that she could get a knife and, you know, I had to watch my back because she got real bad. At that time she was taking five prescriptions.

Home life also was impacted for Joy, who reported that after years of failure in traditional public school her daughter "lost all her self-esteem." She explained, "At that time she was at zero self-esteem." Her daughter disliked attending school and even at home she had no enthusiasm. "…Nothing would interest her, she would just pass time, just sit in her room and that was most of her day," Joy said. After repeated failures left her daughter older than the other students, she lamented, "I don't fit in. I just feel out of place. That is what is getting me frustrated and it is getting me to want to quit."

Her daughter's unhappiness also negatively impacted the parent-child relationship. Joy observed that during that time "she sort of like tended to shut me out." This parent also worried about her daughter's future. "I couldn't see her planning for a future which made me very unhappy because I felt that she wasn't ready to look after herself," Joy said. She thought, "I guess I am always going to have to stand behind her and make sure she is going to have something to fall back on because if I am not there I don't think she is going to have a security blanket."

Finally, Jean reported that her daughter was not happy in the traditional public school environment because "she has enemies that don't like her (at traditional public school)." Negative peer influences and behavior problems plagued Jean's daughter in that setting. Commenting on the struggles that her daughter and other children with disabilities have had, including behavior problems, she noted wistfully, "A lot of the parents are sad too, not just the children."

Impaired Peer Relationships

Five of the six parents in this study reported that their children lacked positive peer relationships while enrolled in traditional public school. Problems reported by parents included isolation, conflict, taunting, and association with the "wrong crowd."

Four of the parents in the study indicated that their children suffered some degree of isolation from their peers in traditional public school. Asked if her son had good social relationships in the traditional public school, Josie responded, “No, he has always been isolated. He had good relationships in elementary but when it turned to junior high it didn’t.”

Echoing the theme of social isolation, Joy reported that her daughter felt “like an outcast” in the traditional public school environment. By the time her daughter’s learning disability had been diagnosed, “as far as age wise she was already beyond all the other age ranges as far as school was concerned. Everybody else was within 15, 16 years of age. She was already hitting 18 years old.” This age gap caused her to feel “out of place, plain and simple.” Joy said her daughter told her, “ ‘I just don’t fit in.’ ” Peer relationships outside of school were limited as well. “Before, she didn’t have too many people as far as calling her, carrying on conversations on the phone,” she said, adding,” She didn’t have lengthy conversations on the phone. They were, ‘OK, hello, that’s it, bye,’ and that was it.” During this period, her daughter rarely interacted with persons outside the family. “…It just didn’t interest her. She would just stay within the family and that was it. Family outings and that was all-no extracurricular activities outside the family.”

Therese also reported social isolation for her child in the public school environment. “He didn’t have too many friends when he was in the elementary school. There was just a few.”

Peer relationships were particularly painful in the traditional public school setting for Helena’s daughter who left school during the day to escape torment from her peers. She explained:

> I had to take her back and she really didn't want to be in school because the kids were always picking on her, telling her she was psycho, she was crazy, she was this, she was that, and she really didn't want to go to school anymore.

Even in the classroom setting her daughter was not safe from torment. "The "kids over here in the back will be throwing little papers at her or pencils or whatever," Helena explained.

Three of the parents reported that poor peer relationships were a factor in getting the child into trouble in the school environment. Therese explained that her son would be called into the office for getting into fights as a result of his disability. She said:

> Now, his acting out went as far as physically with the other children. I would get a call to the office for that when he was younger. If they (teachers) would punish him, if they forced him to read out loud, kids made fun of him. He would get angry and he would wait until recess and then punch on them or something. So we have had our share of going to the office.

Two of the parents reported that their children's association with the "wrong crowd" intensified their behavioral problems in traditional public school. Describing the problem with her son, Rachel explained, "He was very introverted. Because he was up to no good, skipping schools, he hung out with the wrong crowd." She observed:

> He was accepted by the ones who probably wouldn't have been accepted by everybody else. The ones wearing black hair greased up, black lipstick. As a matter of fact he had a little friend (deleted for confidentiality) who they hung around with that was his friend. (Name of friend) right now is a dropout you know, stealing cars, running streets, things like that. (Name of friend) did not make it at the traditional high school. He is basically on the streets, involved with the court system and everything

else so. And that was his friend, so.

Describing her son, she added, “He is a follower.” She elaborated, “Setting the fires—he might not be the one setting the fires, but he is looking at them…”

Hanging out with the wrong crowd also negatively influenced Jean’s daughter. “I guess the biggest problem was all the trouble she would get into in the public school due to the fact that there’s more kids and she is a follower and it got her into trouble,” she said. Elaborating, Jean said the problem was “the peer pressure. She was a follower. She decided that ‘Well, if you are not going to stand in the way, I am going to do that too.’ ”

Behavior Problems

In addition to unhappiness, low self-esteem, and impaired peer relations, five of the six parents indicated some level of behavior problems with their children. These ranged from “shutting down” to acting out in school, or truancy. For example Joy, whose daughter was older than her classmates, attended school but was unhappy and didn’t participate. She explained, “She was losing interest in school but it wasn’t enough to where she was even skipping school. She was returning to school on a daily basis but just doing no work at all, just sitting and being present.” This passiveness extended to conferences at school where her mother explained, “She would just turn around and look at me and expect me to answer everything for her. She would just sit there and look at me.” She added, “And the counselors would look at me and, ‘I tell you what, she is trying to say this, and she is trying to say that,’ but she wouldn’t outright come and speak for herself.” Describing that period in her daughter’s life, she observed, “She just closed us out for a good two years of her life because she was just nobody and really wasn’t getting anywhere.”

Both shutting down and acting out were behaviors Therese observed in her son. She said, “Five years he just went through a lot of behavioral issues, acting out, or shutting down--not wanting to work.” As she explained earlier, her son would lash out at other students when he was taunted after being forced to read out loud. At the other end of the continuum, Therese explained, “He would not produce in the classroom. He just wanted to sit and draw because he didn’t know how to deal with his own emotional feelings at that time.” She concluded, “He would go to extremes.”

Three of the parents reported truancy problems with their children in addition to other behavioral issues. When her daughter was in traditional public school, Jean said, “She was getting into trouble, running away so much. She had like five runaways. She wasn’t learning because she wasn’t there.”

Truancy also was a problem for Rachel’s son. She explained:

> I had problems when I was working full-time. I would drop him off in the mornings and come home and get dressed and ready to go to work and sometimes I would drive back up the street and see him basically skipping school, playing hooky. He basically had problems staying in school.

During his public school years her son got into other types of trouble as well including throwing rocks at people from the roof of the school and selling “dirty” magazines. He was suspended on more than one occasion. Rachel explained, “At one point he was even a look out. They were stealing motors or something for a go-cart and he was a look out for the guys.” She added, “But those were the things that he was doing and he might have ended up, you know, in the judicial system.”

Helena’s daughter, who left school because she was unhappy, exhibited both behavioral issues and truancy. “She really didn’t want to be in school anymore,” Helena

said. At home, her daughter's behavior escalated into violence. Helena explained, "… she has these mood swings, bipolar, and she would get very, very violent at the house."

Problematic Learning Environment/Academic Failure

The core theme that the needs of the child were not being met manifested in the academic realm as well as the social/emotional functioning of the child. While all of the parents in the study reported that their children were unhappy in the traditional public school setting, each of the parents reported either academic failure or problems in the learning environment as well.

Helena who had described her daughter as "confined" to one classroom throughout the day explained that she was not learning in that setting. "She couldn't go to any other classes. But even then, they didn't teach her what they were supposed to teach her," she said. Elaborating, she explained, "And she doesn't know math that well because when she was in elementary she was still confined to a little classroom with a disability. They didn't teach her any reading, any math, so she's way behind on her math level." Reading also was difficult in that setting. "She knows how to read but she didn't know a lot of the words because she stutters and they make fun of her for the stuttering," she said. The approach used by teachers did not help. She explained, "They would tell her, you know, 'This is going to be your English. This is going to be your work. Now do your English.' " Helena added, "She could not focus here and there. And she would ask, 'Well I am doing this?' and they would get frustrated with her. The teachers would get frustrated with her."

During her traditional public school years, Jean's daughter also fell behind academically, struggling with reading comprehension. "She does need a lot of help on her comprehension," she explained, adding, "She is slow." Her daughter "does not understand when you read to her, use the vocabulary words, of course she won't

understand, you have to kind of make a short sentence for her." Jean explained, "It takes a very long time to comprehend." At that time her daughter "would say, 'I don't understand.' And so I would have to call the school, set a conference, make changes in her classes."

Even so, her daughter was not passing academically in traditional public school and reading several years below grade level. Her performance in math was impacted as well. Jean explained, "…She has to learn how to read first in order to solve her problems. She can't do the problem if she can't read."

Failing grades and reading below grade level also plagued Therese's son during his years in traditional public school. Very early in his school career, he was diagnosed with a learning disability that impacted his reading. After completing kindergarten he was placed in a developmental first grade. Therese explained, "…That was like a grade in between kinder and first grade. Essentially he was being held back a year before he went into the first grade."

During his elementary school period in traditional public school her son's reading did not improve, he experienced failing grades, and was passed to a higher grade without gaining necessary academic skills. "He was just basically passed up and he never got his reading foundation. He never did. They just passed him up, passed him up," she explained, adding, "In fact the overall outcome from first grade to about sixth grade was he was being passed up to the next grade level." Further, she observed, "There wasn't any improvement in his reading or his behavior, as far as emotionally how he dealt with not being able to read and his frustration or his just completely shutting down and not wanting to do anything."

Her son's difficulties with reading impacted all areas of his academic life. "He had struggles with every subject because it got more and more to the point where in order to do a subject you had to read a lot," she observed. While math concepts were easy, she explained, "It's the reading, it's the how do you figure out how to do the math that is hard."

At this time he was "failing a lot, not turning in a lot of work, barely passing with Ds," she said, noting that the school was not providing her son with the attention he needed to succeed. "They did not focus on the reading disability or the disabilities of the children as much as they were focused on these are just distractions and they are taking too much of my time. And this was a major concern for me," she explained. "He never really got a lot of focused attention as far as helping him with the reading and the instructions and the directions, encouragement, or anything," Therese said, observing," I felt like he was falling through the cracks."

School failure also was a problem for Rachel's son, who she felt was lost in the large urban traditional public school environment. She said, "I felt like he was a number there. He was lost in the shuffle." She explained:

> He was in regular classes, which kind of confused me because I don't know the maximum number of kids that could be in a class, but when I did walk through and see and talk to different teachers, it seemed like he was in a very large setting and just pushed in with the rest of them.

Additionally, Rachel felt that the school had low expectations for her son's academic success. "I had another problem when he was with the special ed services at (name of traditional public school) where there was one teacher who felt my child was so disabled." She added, "And my child is very intelligent. He just has problems. Where he

was giving him the answers to all of his subjects. He basically gave him the answer keys." She concluded, "I think they were treating him like a crippled child instead of this 14 year-old who was capable of doing a lot of things."

Although Joy did not blame the traditional public school for the academic failure experienced by her child, she noted that school personnel were unable to help her daughter succeed in that setting. Joy explained that her daughter's identification as a child with a disability initially was delayed through personal circumstances not the fault of the school. But by the time her daughter was identified as having a learning disability school personnel were unable to pull her from the cycle of failure.

Prior to her identification as a student with a learning disability, Joy explained that her daughter was "in regular courses that she wasn't passing at all. She couldn't make a higher grade of no more than 65. She couldn't score no higher than that because it wasn't staying because she does a lot of homework and a lot of comprehension is verbal." The "overpopulated" general education classes weren't helping her daughter to learn. Joy explained that with "all the confrontations of their kids, some are willing to settle down and listen and there are others that are very distracting as far as the classroom is concerned and stuff." The result was that her daughter "didn't have no comprehension and she couldn't concentrate on what she was trying to pick up just from the oral explanation and oral instructions that the teachers were giving." At that time her daughter was "stuck in the ninth grade for two years," Joy said, explaining, "That just set off a chain reaction as to her, as to all the other problems that came her way."

While the movement into special education classes seemed to help some, her daughter continued to fall behind academically. Joy explained:

She just didn't feel that she was getting anything anymore because the atmosphere (at

the traditional public school) just wasn't satisfying to her. And she says, 'I go with a dislike. It doesn't interest me to be there anymore.' And she says, 'I don't know if it is my self-esteem, my personality or whatever, or it is just because those teachers are not giving me what I am trying to learn or I can't understand what it is they are trying to teach me.'

Her daughter continued to fail in school but was told that she could receive credit if she completed summer school. Joy expressed concerns to school personnel that even though her daughter could then pass with a 70 she was "really not picking up enough of the information that you are supposed to."

"…She was working against this stumbling block where she would never be able to overcome because she was going to school, she was picking up some things, but she wasn't picking up enough to get her ahead or caught up," she said, adding, "And for the world of her, she was trying but she just couldn't get there. She just felt like 'I got left behind and I am never going to get to the front seat.' "

Unlike the other parents in the study, Josie did not state that her son was failing academically in the traditional public junior high. However, her child was unhappy emotionally and Josie did not feel the junior high provided a positive learning environment. Josie earlier described that atmosphere as "abusive" with a focus on gangs and drugs. "I didn't feel like he was getting educated," she said, adding, "It wasn't good. I don't think it was a very good learning environment."

Statewide Testing Less Important

In describing the academic functioning of their children both in traditional public school and in charter schools, significantly, no parent in the study independently commented on their child's performance on statewide testing, a bulwark of the Texas'

educational accountability system (Texas Education Agency, June 18, 2004). Parents only discussed statewide tests in response to direct questioning by the researcher. An analysis of all parental interviews led to the category that statewide testing was less important to these parents than other measures of achievement for their children.

Under that system, the performance of both general and special education students in public schools throughout the state is measured through statewide assessment instruments. “The Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) replaced the TAAS (Texas Assessment of Academic Skills) in the 2002-2003 school year as the state-administered assessment” (Texas Education Agency, June 18, 2004). In addition, the State Developed Alternative Assessment (SDAA) is available for students with disabilities at instructional levels kindergarten through grade eight for whom the ARD committee determines TAKS is not appropriate (Texas Education Agency, June 18, 2004). Also, a Locally Determined Alternate Assessment (LDAA) would be administered under the statewide testing system if the ARD committee determined that both the SDAA and TAKS were inappropriate for a particular student with disabilities (Texas Education Agency, June 18, 2004).

While parents were familiar with the concept of statewide testing, they generally appeared unclear either on the tests administered or the results. For example, Helena indicated that her daughter was exempted from the statewide testing instruments, adding, “I think she took an alternate test.” Also, Josie explained, “He took some of them and he really doesn’t want to come to school then. I guess he took some of them, but he didn’t complete them. And then they put him on an alternative one that was a lower level.” Josie couldn’t recall the name of that test. She explained that it was “the TAAS, the TAKS, or something like that.” In terms of results, “He did OK. He did average. He didn’t do as

good, I think, on the math part." Joy also was confused regarding which instrument had been administered to her daughter. "I get them confused. I don't know which is which," she explained, adding that her daughter indicated she couldn't comprehend the statewide tests she did take in traditional public school. Finally, Therese explained that her son "has been exempted because he is LD. Every time they did the ARD they determined that it would be better to exempt him." When asked if he took an alternate test, she responded, "I believe so. I can't remember the name of that test."

Additionally, three of the parents further indicated that the tests were not particularly important measures of their child's success. Responding to a question on whether the statewide tests were important to her, Therese said, "Yes and no. Yes, because we should always know or always have a standard that all kids should meet, I believe." She added, "But, when you're an LD student there is no way you are going to meet the standard everyone else is, that is the same thing as blanket teaching or saying everybody has to be here is not going to work." She noted that her son's performance on the statewide tests wasn't a big issue in his education "because what I did was focus on where he is at in reference to where he was the prior year, him as an individual—where he was. Compared to everybody else, I wasn't really worried about everybody else." She added, "I wanted to know where he is and how much improvement he has made on his part." Further, she reported that testing was difficult for her son. She explained:

> If you verbally ask him 'Do you understand this concept, in reading do you understand the ideas, in writing, where to put the commas, whatever?' He could explain it to you. He could verbally explain it to you. He just couldn't write it down or spell it out.

Describing the importance of testing, Joy noted that "…it is and it isn't (important). The fact is it is not something that's really an open field to her because she has been

eliminated from I think it is the TAAS." Finally, Rachel noted that there were more pressing matters in her child's life during the period he was enrolled in traditional public school than his performance on statewide tests. She explained:

> When he was at (traditional school) and the other school all I could think about was, 'Is he at school? Did he set fires? Is the little girl pregnant?' You know those are my main concerns. It isn't the testing scores.

Special Education Program was Ineffectual or Problematic

Through analysis of parental stories another category to emerge was that special education services in traditional public schools were either ineffectual or problematic in meeting the needs of their children. All six of the parents in this study reported this experience. Even the two parents who characterized the traditional public school's special education program in more positive terms still reported that the services did not satisfy the needs of their individual children.

Interestingly, while all parents in the study provided information about their child's special education program, they tended to report on their child's education in more holistic terms. Generally, in telling their stories, they described the overall attitudes of school staff, teaching approaches, and outcomes for their child rather than fragmenting them into special education and general education. At times they seemed unclear on the actual special education services or instructional setting in which services were being provided to their children. However, they had no hesitation in describing their child's overall academic and emotional functioning in either the traditional public school or charter school setting. Subcategories of failure to receive services, ineffectual or problematic services, and a lack of support for adjustment to disability emerged from an analysis of parent comments. These subcategories are described below.

Failure to Receive Services

Five of the six parents in this study questioned whether their child was receiving all the services specified in their IEP in traditional public school. They doubted the actual implementation of services designated by the ARD committee. In one of those instances, the parent reported that school personnel had informed her that needed services were not available for her child.

For example, Therese explained:

> …Most of the time what we agreed upon in the ARD was perfect for me. I agreed to everything because yes, this is what we need. Now, as far as its being implemented, it wasn't always implemented in the public school, I believe. And if it was, it just was not enough.

In her case, the school never directly refused to provide a service. "I don't think they just wouldn't (provide a service). I just think it took forever for them to get around to it and we didn't have enough of it and that is probably due to the numbers," she said.

Likewise, Rachel felt that traditional public school personnel did not provide all the services in her son's IEP. "His, what is it, IEP/ IEPs, said certain things that needed to be done and I don't think they were being followed," she said, explaining, "I think they filled out the paperwork at (name of traditional public school) but I don't think they followed the plan."

Following the same theme, Jean likewise questioned whether her daughter received all the services in her IEP in traditional public school even though school personnel treated her with respect. "They did listen, but I don't know that it was getting done because I wasn't there," she explained.

Unlike the other parents who questioned whether their child was receiving services the school agreed to provide, Helena said school personnel informed her they were unable to provide the speech services her daughter needed at the time. “She only got it (speech therapy) for about two weeks around that time. She hardly did get any speech at all,” Helena explained. She said that this was the total speech therapy provided to her daughter for the school year. Later, school personnel informed Helena that her daughter no longer needed even those services. According to Helena, they said, “ ‘She doesn’t need it any more she is doing better.’ I would tell them, ‘But she is not. She’s stuttering again.’ ” The professionals responded, “ ‘Oh well, the class is full. She has to wait till next year.’ ” In a resigned tone Helena explained, “I said, ‘OK.’ I mean you can’t argue with that.”

Josie also questioned whether her child received all of his services. Comparing her son’s situation in a traditional public school junior high special education program to special education services in the charter school, she said, “The junior high supposedly had the funding and the structure but I don’t think they cared and they didn’t have the communication. They never followed through.”

Additionally, Josie noted earlier that her son did not always receive services indicated by the ARD committee because general education teachers, focused on discipline, sometimes refused to let her son participate in pull-out services. She explained that the ARD committee placed him in a general education instructional setting but he could leave the classroom and receive help in a setting such as a content mastery center. “Even though the program was there, the cooperation by the other mainstream teachers wasn’t there because they were more focused on discipline,” she explained.

Ineffectual/Problematic Services

Parents indicated that the special education services that were provided to their children either did not go far enough in meeting the needs of their child or were themselves problematic. As noted earlier, all children in the study were either unhappy or failing academically or both during the time they attended traditional public school. While sometimes special education services and individual teachers were helpful, overall both special education and general education programs fell short in meeting the needs of their children.

Therese noted that both class size and teaching approaches also were a problem in traditional public school setting. “I feel that they didn’t have enough time to make sure that each special ed student was getting exactly what that special ed student needed,” she said. At one point Therese said her child was in a general education setting in which he could get extra help outside the classroom in a content mastery center (CMC) that provided support for her child’s success in the general education classroom. “Even the CMC class in public schools, there were no many children going in and out of there all day,” she observed, adding that even in that setting her son did not receive the attention and encouragement he needed.

Generally speaking, special education services “were not for him very effective.” She noted, “I think the CMC class did make a difference as far as him being able to get away from everybody and be by himself.” However, she added, “It was still too many kids.”

Both the attitude and approach of general and special education teachers had an impact on her child’s ability to learn. She observed:

> It’s the way it was introduced and presented to him made a big difference. If the teachers were like, ‘Oh you are just on my nerves. Get out of my class and go to

CMC' or whatever, then he didn't do so good. And then the next year it could be different. Another teacher could say, 'Hey, you behaved today. You get to go to CMC. You *get* to do this.' Then it was perceived by him not as a punishment but as something positive.

Sometimes the instructional approach or teacher training was the issue. "I feel like a lot of the teachers and the teachers' aides, people like that, they are not even equipped to have a special ed student," Therese said. She explained:

I mean they really didn't know how to work with each special ed child. Because, this is just an observation, when a teacher gets up and she does blanket teaching—everybody is doing the same thing altogether—that never worked for my son or for other special ed students I would imagine because they are not all going to work at the same pace or master a concept at the same time as everybody else.

Additionally, Therese found the provision of services such as counseling tended to be motivated more by the urgency of a crisis rather than being proactive. "When there was a crisis they would do something. Crisis motivated them instead of let's do something beforehand. It was more motivated by crisis."

Finally, Therese noted that the developmental first grade class her child had been placed in set the tone for academic and emotional struggles that followed him in traditional public school. She seemed unsure if the classroom was special education or general education but did indicate she thought all the students in that classroom had disabilities. She noted:

He said that there were children in there jumping on furniture, going on their pants and things like that and he was very offended by that because he was in there. Because he has always been very articulate and very disciplined but they put him in there and

he had a real problem being in there.

Even though her son did not like this setting, he stayed there for an entire school year. She added, “And I don’t know if back then they didn’t know what to do with children like him or not. I don’t know. That was just his history.”

Rachel likewise found that much of the school’s response to her child was motivated by crisis rather than a proactive approach to solving his difficulties. She did not differentiate between the special education or general education program in that regard. “The only time that someone would call is if there was a serious incident,” she said, adding, “when they were ready to suspend him, things like that.” During the period when her son was walking out of the traditional public school, she explained:

> You know what really just rubbed me wrong with (traditional public school) was I got a letter saying that I would go to court because he had too many absences, but no one had told me he was absent until it reached that maximum number.

Also, Rachel found that the school staff had an attitude towards her child that interfered with his learning. She felt the school was treating him as a “crippled child” and that one teacher, as described earlier, was giving him the answer keys. Asked if this was a special education teacher she said, “He might have been, but to my understanding he was something like a mentor, like he would go check on him and see if he was doing well and what he needed and things like that.” She added that the attitude of teachers in the traditional public junior school was “like let’s do everything for him. And he is intelligent.”

Unlike Rachel, Jean reported more positive interactions with school staff regarding her daughter’s disability, indicating that they listened to her concerns as a parent and treated her with respect. However, even though her daughter received pull-out assistance

while enrolled in general education classes, Jean reported that she continued to fail in school and struggled with a lack of comprehension of the academic instruction.

A similar circumstance was reported by Joy, who characterized the traditional public school special education program as “very good” and indicated that special education professionals tried to help her daughter and treated Joy with respect as a parent. Once her daughter was identified with a learning disability and placed in all special education classes, “she started being able to relate more to her class work and was able to attribute more listening time to her teachers.” Additionally, on the positive side, Joy explained, “They were trying their very best to work with her.” She added:

> …As soon as they come across problems with the students and stuff they try to make conferences to see if they can better whatever it is that is troubling their students because they did bring it up to my attention when they found out she needed special ed classes and then when she was there they kept telling me well, (name of student) is not turning in her work or she is turning in incomplete assignments.

However, even though her daughter was learning more in the special education classes, she continued to fall behind academically. Joy explained:

> Because there was a lot of things like in some parts in history and then some parts in math that the teacher would explain and then she would go and ask for individual help and she was still telling her it was like if she was listening to a sounding board and it just wasn’t coming in. I don’t know if it was their method of explaining things to her or it was just too fast that she couldn’t intake it all at one time.

Although her daughter was learning more it was “sort of like I am learning, but just to this much and that is as far as I am getting,” Joy said, adding, “It was just at the time it just wasn’t giving her what she wanted out of that school.”

Special education services in a traditional public junior high school were even less effective for Helena's daughter. She explained that her daughter was "confined only to one classroom" throughout the day and unhappy in that setting. As Helena reported earlier, her daughter was taunted by other students in the class and wasn't learning. Also, Helena, like some of the other parents, observed that counseling services were more crisis oriented. "When she acted up or she was misbehaving they will send her there (to the counselor)."

Finally, Helena noted that instructors needed more training in teaching students with disabilities. She said:

> There are some teachers that don't understand her disability. Either that or they are not trained to have a student with a disability like her. That she is low and they keep telling, repeating her and repeating her how to do her work and she tries doing it and then when she tells them they say, 'No, that's not what we told you. This is what you are supposed to be doing. Pay attention.' And that's when I said, 'Ah, that teacher is not eligible to teach a special education student because he or she gets frustrated.'

Likewise, Josie encountered problems with the special education program in junior high. She contrasted this with the elementary where she was pleased by both the program and the progress her son achieved. She explained, "The educational part as far as the disability was better at the elementary level. It was very thorough. It was very everyday consistent. I was pleased with the progress that he was making." The atmosphere changed in the junior high school, with more of a focus on discipline. The special education program suffered as well. "I don't feel he got too far with the special ed. The communication fell off with that and it wasn't organized," she said, adding, "I am sure there was a few good teachers in there, but as a whole it was not structured well at all."

The school focused more on gangs and drugs. “The school was kind of uptight about it. It kind of affected the whole atmosphere,” she noted.

Also, she reported difficulties talking with teachers about her son’s program. “There wasn’t hardly any communication between me and the teachers and you would call them and they would never call you back, that type of thing,” she explained.

Lack of Support for Adjustment to Disability

While parents in this study reported not only the child, but the family as a whole, was impacted by the child’s disability, they indicated that the school provided very limited support for familial adjustment to the disability or information on how to support their child’s learning at home. Therese, for example, reported earlier that she and her husband struggled to cope with her son’s disability, with her husband first denying the disability while she felt somehow to blame for his failures. Her son, in addition to his school struggles felt that his disability was creating a division in the home, she explained. However, limited resources were provided by the traditional public school to assist families in this adjustment process. She said, “I really don’t remember anything that was for the parents to get a grasp on this is what the problem is and this is how you can help. There wasn’t very much of that at all.”

Jean also indicated that she did not recall receiving information from traditional public school personnel that would help her understand and work with her daughter’s disability. She noted that she did receive the Notice of Procedural Safeguards Document from the school. However, she commented, “There is more information that I read in the book but I’d like to have somebody come over to the house so we can go over it, the rights.” She added, “They do send you the book but they don’t send you a body home to discuss what the disabilities are and there are some things that I don’t understand.” She noted that she

would like more information to aid her in understanding her daughter's disability and how to help her more as a parent. "It would really be nice if they focused on that more," she said. "To have parents come to meetings or have them do home visits on children with disabilities because they do need help." The information provided by the school is not enough, she said, explaining, "…I would like to see that because learning disability you go to the school and they talk to you about it one time with an ARD and to me it is not enough."

Likewise, Rachel indicated that her son's traditional public school did not provide information on how to work with her child or adjustment to his disability. "He was a number over there," she said, explaining, "You know if a fire was set and he was one of them, then I would get a phone call."

The System could not be Changed

Another category which emerged from an analysis of the data was that the educational system in traditional public schools could not be changed. Regardless of whether the child's difficulty was in general or special education or simply the size and attitude of the school, each parent in this study finally reached a point where they looked for educational answers outside the traditional public school setting. All parents reported first attempting to work with traditional public school personnel to meet the needs of their child in that setting. Two parents tried private schools and one attempted home schooling before transferring their children to the charter school setting. Although each story is unique, every parent in this study utilized traditional public schooling as the educational choice for their child prior to seeking solutions in a charter school. Some parents reported greater efforts to work with school personnel than others, but all ultimately reached the conclusion that their child's needs could best be met in a different educational setting.

Four of the six parents in this study noted serious deficiencies in communication with personnel in the traditional public school district. Two of the parents reported more positive communication with school staff. Even so, their children's emotional and academic needs remained unmet.

Therese, whose child was identified with a disability early in elementary school, spent years trying to work with school personnel in the traditional public school setting. From the beginning, when her son was unhappy in the developmental first grade, Therese had little success in remedying his problems. She explained that her attempts to improve his situation frequently were not well received by school personnel. Therese explained:

> Well, I would go in and talk to the teacher quite often and tell them, 'You know, he doesn't like it here. He is not appreciating this environment. He feels no one is paying attention to him. He can't get his questions answered.'

Traditional public educators did not respond positively to her concerns. Therese reported that school staff then would tell her "that it was him" and "he just didn't know how to behave."

Throughout her son's years in traditional public school, Therese found that some personnel were helpful and others were not. However, overall, she explained:

> I felt like I was more of a nuisance to them. I even felt like I as a parent was a nuisance because they would get upset if I would just come in and check on him all the time. You know what I mean? They wouldn't like my questions, especially if I pulled out the ARDs and said, 'Did you read this line right here?' They wouldn't work with me. I went back to it being, it's just so large and there's so many children, that they are not able to help a ton.

Therese also found that she could not always speak directly to teachers when she had a concern about her child. She said:

> Sometimes I wasn't allowed to. I had to talk to only the counselor and she would talk to them for me or I would talk to the CMC teacher and she would be a messenger for me. I think it's because they were too busy, too many students and too many parents.

In most instances, Therese felt that it was not that teachers lacked concern for her child, but that they were struggling to deal with the demands of their jobs. "With a couple of individuals I did experience the 'I don't care.' They were just on your nerves. But with most of them it was 'I am too overwhelmed.' "

Therese also found that school personnel in ARD committee meetings tended to blame her son for his struggles in school. She explained:

> It was like 'You are making excuses for him and he is lazy and I think that he can do it.' And 'I think he's not reading just because he doesn't want to.' These were statements that I heard from different people throughout the years. And 'If you don't push him, he'll never learn.' Things like that different teachers would say because they would always have a teacher in there. And 'We can't just let him draw all day because he doesn't want to read,' stuff like that.

When her child had his three-year reevaluation then Therese discussed the testing results with school staff. She noted:

> It wasn't until he would have his three-year evaluation where they actually had the points where I could say to the teachers 'See, this tells me right here he can not read this and he doesn't even want to try. We need to help. We need to go back and find out if he needs to learn phonics.' "

This exchange typically was not well received by school staff. She elaborated, “They were mad because I had to show them that. They would get upset because here I am an uneducated person telling an educated person, ‘You need to read this.’ ” This attitude from school personnel left Therese feeling she was not an equal partner in the education of her child. She observed:

> I felt, I believe, and this was my perception. I was made to feel like, ‘You don’t really know what you’re talking about and we are the professionals and we know how to handle this and we’ll get back to you’-like a brush off you know, like, ‘What do you know, Lady?’ And a parent knows because the child acts at the house emotionally different, bad, I should say manifestations.

Asked whether the school personnel made changes in response to her concerns she said, “They would get a little defensive with me and say, ‘Yeah, OK, we’ll try something else.’ ” In terms of follow through she explained, “Sometimes they would. Sometimes they wouldn’t.” Elaborating, she added, “Every time I’d go some people were very accommodating. Some people were not as accommodating. But as far as results, I didn’t always get them.” Therese said she always agreed in the ARD committee meetings because on paper she did agree with the program for her son. Implementation of that IEP was the problem, she explained.

Responding to a question on whether she was aware of rights as a parent to complain to the Texas Education Agency, she replied, “Yes, I was aware. But I really tried to just keep working with them for some reason.” She also did not feel that hiring an attorney was a choice either. “Financially it was not a viable option for me. I didn’t want any kind of retaliation on my son or for him to be treated differently in front of other students,” she said, adding, “I always thought it might make it worse for him if I did anything.”

Another parent who experienced difficulties communicating with school personnel, Helena, whose daughter failed academically and was unhappy due to taunting from her peers, reported that school personnel would not listen to her concerns. Describing her attempts to address the problems at an ARD committee meeting, Helena said:

> The teacher would be there at the meeting and they would say, 'Well, (name of student) is doing this. (Student name) is doing that, but (student name) doesn't listen.' And then I would say, 'Well, (student) complains that the kids are picking on her.' 'Oh well, all the kids have a disability and they are going to get frustrated because they are in that little classroom.' I would say, 'Yes, but (student) doesn't want to be in that classroom.'

Helena explained that her daughter wanted to be in a general education classroom, but expressing her concerns did not result in either a change in placement or a cessation of taunting from her daughter's classmates. "They would talk to the parents of the other kids but then they would stop for a while, then they would continue doing it again."

Instead of moving her daughter into a general education classroom, school personnel left her in the same classroom but seated in closer proximity to the teacher. She added:

> They would either sit her in front with the teacher but still kids over here in the back will be throwing little papers at her or pencils or whatever and the teacher would say, 'I didn't see that.' He would cover his eyes like, you know, 'I didn't see that.'

School personnel simply did not take effective action to alleviate her concerns. She explained, "They were not listening to me, or to her."

Another parent, Rachel, who noted problems with an instructor's giving her son answer sheets, also reported that she was unable to stop this practice by communications in ARD committee meetings. She said, "That was discussed in an ARD and I just felt like

he wasn't receiving the best education possible." The school continued to treat her son like " 'Oh, poor thing,' " Rachel said. Elaborating on the reaction of school personnel when she complained, she said:

> It was more of an amazement. The teacher who did that was not present so they said that they would look into it. He was saying he was helping him out. But, and basically my son was even laughing about it, because basically my son has had years of therapy and years of dealing with different systems where he could play the game very well and my son continued to say that he did give him the answers and he basically laughed at him.

Rachel also found that the problem with her son walking off the school campus continued. She didn't feel she could make changes within the existing structure "because when we would drop him off they had security guards and cops and everything but the kids were allowed to walk right out of the doors." Asked if she was aware of her legal rights, Rachel said that she had received her procedural safeguards and knew her legal rights as a parent. She added:

> I exercised my legal rights by pulling him out of there. Because, if you are just driving by there, you know, there is a lot of kids there and I don't know about now, because he hasn't been there for a while, but it looks like basically the kids are running things. There's a lot of gang involvement.

Rachel felt that complaining to the Texas Education Agency or exercising due process rights would not have resulted in a real change for her child. She explained, "It's just because the school was so big and I just think he was a number."

Problems with gangs and poor communication also were systemic issues preventing change for Josie, whose son had a positive public school experience in elementary

school, but who described his junior high experience as “a nightmare.” Josie said she tried to address concerns about her son with the teachers and the principal at that school. “I made three appointments with the principal and he never called me. He was on vacation for the first two weeks of school,” she commented. The situation with teachers was not much better. “I talked to some of them but the attitude was very apathetic at the school at that time. It might be better now, depending on who the administrator was,” she explained.

Given the circumstances, rather than try to assert her parental rights, like Rachel, Josie reached the point that the best solution was to “remove him from the scene.” She explained that she reached that conclusion:

> Because it was really bad. Their attitude was like, ‘Oh, this is a gang school. We have to watch the children very carefully.’ I said, ‘When I went here it wasn’t a gang school.’ Of course, that was many years ago. I didn’t feel there was any way to get through the system at all with my child.

Both Jean, whose daughter made multiple attempts to run away, and Joy, whose daughter felt like an “outcast” in the traditional public school setting, reported much more positive experiences in terms of communication in the schools their children attended. Both of these mothers reported that school personnel treated them with respect. However, ultimately, these schools were not able to meet the needs of their children.

Jean had explained earlier that the school listened to her and treated her with respect although she doubted if there was a follow through on the services for her child. However, the size of the school created problems for her daughter. As she explained earlier, “I guess the biggest problem was all the trouble she would get into in the public school due to the fact that there’s more kids and she is a follower and it got her into

trouble." She transferred her daughter to a charter school because "I felt being she had a behavior problem, discipline, that maybe if I changed it would do better."

Joy also reported a caring attitude on the part of school personnel, but by the time her child was identified and placed in the district's special education program she "felt like an outcast" because of her age. Additionally, even in the special education setting, she was frustrated and unable to learn enough to catch up academically with her peers. Joy said her daughter's age "discouraged her even more and she was asking for help but she says, 'I don't know where to go to. I don't know where to turn anymore.' " Continuing, Joy explained, "And really, she was yelling out for help, because she kept telling me, 'I am not ready to quit school because I am not ready to sit at home and do nothing.' "

Parental Knowledge of Charter Schools was Limited

Once parents determined that the traditional public schools were not meeting the needs of their child, they reached a point where they felt they could not solve the problems in that setting. However, parents in this study either were generally unaware of the charter school alternative or had very limited knowledge of charter schools during the time their child struggled in the traditional public school setting. Hence, the category of parental knowledge of charter schools was limited emerged from an analysis of all six of the parent interviews.

For example, Therese, who continued trying to work with school personnel throughout her child's years in elementary school, said:

> As far as alternatives for my child, as far as charter schools, I didn't realize that there were any. I thought if he wasn't public school educated I would have to put him in a private school, which I could not afford. I didn't know that there was something in the middle that I could do for him. So I basically got kind of stuck in the public school

system with him. I didn't have any other choice. I was not aware.

She learned of the charter school alternative for the first time through her church. She explained:

> Fortunately, we were involved with a church that sponsored the charter school that had started and when I heard of the charter schools and how they have a little more flexibility and creativity to be more individualized in the studies for each student, I went ahead and had him reevaluated in an ARD and placed in a charter school and that was about seventh grade.

Another parent who was unaware of the charter school alternative, Helena, said that she looked into charter schools after a difficult summer in which her daughter's behaviors became severe, leading to hospitalization. She explained:

> So, in between summer we decided to look out for a charter school because we didn't know about any charter school until my neighbor across the street told me about it. He said, 'Well, there are some charter schools. You can find out if there is a close one nearby.' So, I did. I sent for the whole booklet of all the charter schools in (name of city) and we chose this one because it is near our home. And that's how she came to be over here.

Rachel, likewise, did not know about charter schools and indicated that a friend encouraged her to consider that setting. She said, "What happened was a real good friend of mine was trying to send him to (a disciplinary program)," she explained, adding, "I was looking for a (disciplinary program) for him because it was nonstop problems with the schools and I was always getting calls from work, pick him up and other things, and so she took me over there."

Josie also was unaware of the charter school option at the time when she was dissatisfied with traditional public school. Not knowing about charter schools, she chose to home school her son. “I started home schooling him then, which was hard because I have a disability. And then my parameters for mathematics wasn’t so great either, but we got by and then we found a charter school,” she said, adding, “A door opened for a charter school.”

Before learning of the charter school, Josie considered placing her son in a private school, but found it was too costly. “I needed something that I could basically not pay any tuition,” she said. Speaking of charter schools she observed, “I didn’t know they existed. I kept applying for private school. There’s educational grants you get but it doesn’t pay for the whole tuition.” She concluded, “I was going to put him in a private school but there wasn’t enough money for the grant. I had to come up with like two-thirds of the money.” However, “just by staying in communication with different associations and places that deal with education I found out there was a charter school at the time. It was state regulated and basically you did not have to pay tuition,” she said, adding, “It was like a private school but it was on a smaller scale as far as ratio of student to teacher.”

Like some of the other parents in the study, Jean learned of the charter school option through friends. Jean said, “I found out by her friends at school.” One of the parents Jean knew in the traditional public school placed her child in the charter school to improve her behavior. Describing the experience of this parent, Jean said that she transferred her daughter:

> Due to the fact that it (had a disciplinary program). So she would get in trouble in school and she would go to (name of the disciplinary program) and that’s

where she ended up. And she was a runaway and got in trouble. And as of today she is back in public school because her discipline changed. She came back a lot better.

While most of the parents learned of the charter school alternative through friends or in the case of Josie, an outside educational association, Joy was the only parent in the study who learned of the option through her daughter's traditional public school. Concerned that her daughter would drop out of school, Joy met with the high school counselor. She explained:

> The counselor from (name of traditional high school) told me the only other option was to try to see if she could fit into a charter school. So at that time was when I came to end up looking to see where it is that I could fit her in and this is the place that, right here, which was where I ended up putting her in.

At that time Joy said that she had heard of charter schools but had limited information and wasn't sure if her daughter had to be suspended from traditional public school as a prerequisite to charter school admission. She explained:

> So at the beginning she wasn't too sure that she would be able to qualify to be in the charter school. So it took us a while to where we actually gained enough knowledge and gained enough information to be able to see about having her transferred to the charter schools because in the public schools when I talked to her counselors she says, 'We are not sure exactly what you need. We don't know. She might not qualify to be in there or she will just have to finish here.' She says, 'But you might want to start looking into it to see. If it does, it would be to her advantage to be better off than here. It would have more of a one-to-one basis.'

Size Does Matter

Once enrolled in the charter schools, all six of the parent interviews revealed the category that the smaller size of the charter school setting better met the needs of their child. Further categories of emotional well being and academic improvement also emerged from an analysis of parental interviews. School size had a positive influence on each of those categories. Improvements were greatest in the category of improved emotional well-being, which parents reported resulted when each of the children in this study transferred to the charter school. Additionally, although not as strong a category, the smaller size also resulted in improved academic functioning for five of the six children in the study.

As noted earlier, all parents in the study stated that the smaller charter school size had a positive impact on their children. While each parent indicated that the smaller numbers were beneficial, they also pointed out concurrent pluses such as a positive atmosphere, improved communication, and greater attention in the smaller setting as well.

Joy, whose daughter felt like an “outcast” who could never catch up with her peers academically in traditional public schools, explained that both the small size and the charter school atmosphere benefited her child. “It is more of a welcome atmosphere that she gets overall in general,” she said, adding that the benefits are the result of, “In general, the attention that they give her, the time they take for her, the interest they have taken as far as her being able to take in the information that she needs to.” Explaining further, she noted, “They pay attention to her problems and her troubles that she is having as far as learning. They take the time to listen to her.” She concluded, “It is just something that she said she didn’t feel she was getting before as far as really hearing the root of her problems.”

Likewise Jean, whose daughter failed academically and repeatedly ran away during her years in traditional public school, found that the smaller size helped her child. Explaining one of the reasons for transfer, she said, “I felt she could work better in a smaller group of kids and which she did. It took a while for her to get adjusted to it but she can work better one-on-one when they do help her out more.” She added, “My daughter benefits better in a smaller, less children.”

The “small scale” also helped Josie’s son, who had a positive experience in elementary but found the traditional public junior high atmosphere stressful and “abusive.” “I think somehow the elementary and the charter school kind of parallel in the sense that there is a small scale. I think being in a small scale you can really get to know your schoolmates and the teacher,” she said, adding, “I think it builds the confidence and self esteem.” Elaborating, Josie said, “Well, I think that a charter school is good.” She added, “I think it is a better concept than public school even though public school teachers and counselors talk bad about charter schools. But I think if you are happy with where you are you will learn better.”

Size and the attitude of school staff also had a positive impact on Helena’s daughter, who failed academically in traditional public school, was truant, and had been hospitalized for emotional difficulties. She explained, “She is getting more attention here from the teachers and more help.” Additionally, when her daughter has a problem in the charter school “she can speak herself and they will try help working with her.”

Rachel, whose son also failed and was truant in the traditional public school setting, likewise found that the charter school setting resulted in positive changes in her son. She explained:

I think the people at (current charter school), maybe because it is a smaller setting are

more or appear to be more capable of meeting his needs. Whereas, at the other school, it's because it was a fairly large school he was basically a number and things would come up when there was a problem.

The charter school staff seemed concerned about her son as an individual. "The people over there, those kids you know, those kids can be a handful but they seem like they genuinely care and they are out to meet his needs," she said, adding, "And everybody knows him by name and I was very impressed by that, knowing him by his name. And if I would call and ask about like the little girl (her son's girlfriend), someone would be on top of it."

Rachel explained that charter school staff agreed to send home daily notes so she could hold her son accountable for his academic work and behavior. "The notes, I was impressed, like a lot of teachers would not send home a note daily for a kid you know," she said, offering this advice to traditional public schools: "They need to cut their numbers and they need to have a more hands on relationship with the students."

A smaller setting also proved favorable for Therese's son, who had been failing academically in traditional public school and acting out due to his frustration. She observed this improvement immediately following his enrollment. She said:

I would say the first six weeks everything just changed for him and I truly believe it was the environment, the smaller class sizes, the building relationships with the teachers and to his benefit a lot of the general ed teachers were people that he knew from our church.

Explaining his improvement, she said, "Number one is the student-teacher ratios." While she had reported poor communication at times with teachers in the traditional public school setting, Therese said her relationship and access to teachers improved at the

charter school. “I believe it is because of the smaller numbers and because I was able to go to talk to every teacher individually about my son,” she said, adding, “I had more access. I could come before or after school and they were more available to me like I said because, like I said, the smaller numbers.”

While she and her husband were at odds over the education of their son when he was in traditional public school, that situation also improved in the smaller setting. She said:

> When we moved to the charter school it made my husband and I on the same page with our child and it made the relationship between the teacher, the counselor, and the parents closer knit so to speak where we were tighter with each other. We would communicate with each other more and therefore the child felt like he was getting help from everybody together.

In this environment, it was harder for a child to get into trouble. Therese explained, “I believe that in the smaller charter school setting you are so known that you can’t do anything and get away with it, you know. Which is kind of a good thing for the parents. We like that.” She concluded, “The kids don’t necessarily like that but we do.”

Relationships with school staff were important in addition to size. She explained:

> I feel like the big difference is the net or network or parents, teachers, counselors, administrators, peers, and the student is tighter in a smaller environment and people don’t just fall through. I know for my son that was the case. And to me that is all based on relationship.

Emotional Well Being

After their transfer to the smaller charter school environment, each of the children in this study experienced increased emotional well being. While every parent reported some level of emotional malaise in their child in the traditional public schools, their children

were happier in the charter school setting. Five of the parents had reported behavioral difficulties in their children in the traditional public school setting. All five of those parents reported improved behavior as well. For some students, the change was dramatic. Subcategories of improved behavior and happier child/greater self esteem emerged from an analysis of parent comments in the category of emotional well being. Findings in those subcategories are described in subsequent sections.

Improved Behavior

While multiple parents reported dramatic changes in behavior for their children, none were more pronounced that those exhibited by Rachel's son. In the traditional public school environment, he had been repeatedly truant, associated with the "wrong crowd," and found himself in trouble in school. The interactions between the charter school staff and home ended those behaviors, according to Rachel.

Working in tandem, school personnel and this parent devised a system in which teachers sent a note home daily detailing both his behavior and work completed for the day. This proved very effective according to Rachel. She explained:

> Now it is all about rewards and consequences for his actions and he's going to be 17 years old. I've gotten to a point where I used to get a lot of calls from the different schools and at this point I let him know that 'If I get a call about your behavior and something that you can maintain, I am going to charge you for going up there. So my rate is 20 bucks an hour.' (laughs) So, and he chooses to pay me, which is basically work around the house and pay me and this and that, he can do that. He wanted to know if he was going to get charged for this and I told him no. (laughs) But if I have to go up to the school because he is barking like a dog or he skipped school, that is my time and it is unnecessary and he will have consequences for that. And the school has

been very good about letting me know what is going on with him. He knows he is not going to pull the wool over their heads, you know.

The daily note proved effective in stopping unwanted behaviors. She explained:

I haven't heard any behavior problems other than at one point I think they sent in a new substitute or a new teacher and he did try to test him, asking if he wanted to go to the restroom at that particular moment and I think the teacher had other plans. And he did some testing, but you know, since we are on this system, another teacher sent me a note home to let me know what he was doing.

Not only is her son behaving appropriately in the classroom, he has ceased some of the emotional behaviors that he exhibited in the traditional public school setting such as barking like a dog. Also, while her son was "like on three different medications" to deal with his emotional problems during the time he was enrolled in traditional public school, in the charter school setting he has not needed medication and has not exhibited these behaviors. Rachel explained, "When we did change schools we took him off of all the medication. We haven't had no bizarre behavior yet. He is perfect at home."

Rachel also observed that the presence of disciplinary programs at her son's charter school have had a positive impact on his behavior. Offering advice to public school administrators earlier, Rachel had noted the need to cut the number of students and develop more of a relationship with students. She elaborated further: "And I feel like if there is any gang involvement or drug things they really need to address it and not turn their heads, you know to those situations. I think they need to deal with them." She added:

I felt like with my kid, you know, he was getting into all kinds of things and it wasn't here (home), you know, but he was basically doing it at school. I just think if the kids

saw hey, if you do these things these are the consequences you will receive. Whereas over at (the charter school) they know if they are in trouble you know they have that (disciplinary program).

Rachel noted that she used the presence of the disciplinary program at the charter school to motivate her son. She said:

I drop him off in the morning and I tell him, 'You want to go there? And if you have to be here at seven o'clock in the morning, guess what, you're catching the bus because I'm not getting you here any sooner than eight and you are on your own. So think about getting your hair cut and all the consequences of your behavior.'

While Joy's daughter didn't skip school or act out, she simply attended class, not participating, not doing her work, and feeling emotionally like an "outcast." The transfer to the charter school likewise had a huge impact on her behavior and self-esteem. Since coming to the charter school, Joy said her daughter no longer sits in school withdrawn and passive, but instead participates actively her education. She explained:

When we have had the ARD meetings in the charter school she takes the initiative and explains what it is that she is stumbling on, what it is that she thinks will help her progress a little bit more or a little bit faster. To where before she wouldn't even take the time to make herself known or to be present in the conferences.

Now her daughter has more self-confidence. Joy said:

Now she is more outspoken. She explains herself. To where before she wouldn't even take that initiative. She would just sit back and I would do the talking for her. Which is very hard because I am not in her head. I am not in her mind. And then at the same time as far as our personal life between mother and daughter has changed a whole lot too because back then she tended to shut me out. 'If you don't talk to me I don't know

what is bothering you. I don't know what the problems are in school that are causing you difficulty,' I said. 'You have to come and tell me.' She said, 'You don't understand. You don't understand.' I said, 'Well, you have to explain.' She said, 'Well, I am trying.' She says, 'You don't seem to be listening to what I am telling you.' I said, 'I am, but you are really not telling me what is wrong with the classes.' 'Just the whole deal of the school. I just don't fit in. You don't understand.'

Joy contrasted that situation to her daughter's enthusiasm for attending the charter school: She said:

And now she comes, and there is times that the weather is really, really bad and she travels by public transportation and I say 'Honey, maybe you should wait.' 'No. No. I'm going. I'm going.' And now it is to where she enjoys coming and she enjoys her day here.

While Josie did not report behavioral difficulties with her son in the traditional public school setting, she noted that the charter school offered a better approach to discipline. "Him being educated and discipline was important to me," she said, explaining that in the charter school setting "they would discipline him more." Like Rachel, Josie found that the presence of a disciplinary program on campus benefited her son. She explained that she had him placed in that setting on a few occasions in previous years with a positive outcome. Describing the results, she said, "It seemed a lot better. He seemed much better disciplinary wise. He needs a lot of structure. That is the only thing that would be negative about him because of his deficits."

Jean, whose daughter experienced academic failure and was repeatedly truant in traditional public school, also praised the charter school's disciplinary program and its impact on her daughter's behavior. Describing the setting, Jean said, "(Name of the

program) is more of a discipline and they do have some activities. They do exercise and have to participate." In terms of her daughter's behaviors Jean explained:

> It seems to help. She listens. She is not a morning person so it is hard sometimes for her to get up in the morning. While she is there so far I haven't had complaints. She just, you know, listens and follows the rules. Her behavior has improved. I don't hear anything negative. And I have been there and I do go to the school and pick her up and get out and I do get, you know, that she's been good.

The instructor at the disciplinary program also has been a positive influence. "Because this is an instructor that will yell at her and you know it is like a father role, you know, and he disciplines her," Jean said, adding, "Where if I have any trouble, problems here at home with her I can pass it on to him and he will definitely talk to her." She concluded, "That is a very good thing."

Another dramatic change in behavior after entering the charter school was reported by Helena, whose daughter had become violent, was hospitalized for behavior problems, and took medication for her emotional state prior to her transfer to the charter school. "She is stable," said Helena, describing her daughter's emotional condition in the charter school. "She still gets her mood swings now and then because she is 17 years old. She wants to go out and have a boyfriend," she added. However, there has been no need for hospitalization for behavior problems since her daughter entered the charter school. "She's been doing OK. And no medicine. She's not been taking no medicine, which is good," Helena observed.

Explaining the change, Helena said, "I think it is because of the school and she is more happier." Like Rachel, Helena reported that the charter school staff was more willing to work with her child when a problem arose. While peers tormented Helena's

daughter in the traditional public school setting, that problem improved in the charter school due to the response from charter school staff. Helena explained:

> The thing is that she doesn't have as much trouble with the kids here like she would normally have had at a public school. She has her problems here with the kids but then she tells the counselors about it and then right away they help her with her problem. Whereas in public school they wouldn't have paid any attention to her. She would have been ignored.

In both the charter school and traditional public school setting her daughter received assistance from a counselor when there was a problem, but the implementation was different. Helena explained, "It's the same thing. When she acted up or she was misbehaving they will send her there (to the counselor in traditional public school). But over here if she has a problem, she needs a problem to be talked over, she will come and ask for help over here." Noting the difference, she commented, "They do listen here."

Like several of the parents in the study, Therese observed pronounced differences in her son's behavior soon after his transfer to the charter school. At the traditional public school she explained that many educators treated him as a behavior problem. During that time, he either acted out in frustration or "shut down," refusing to work. Upon his arrival at the charter school, a dramatic change occurred. "For my son, it was like a complete change. Actually, we were stunned," said Therese, explaining that the improvement was noticeable "as soon as he changed." Outlining the changes, which Therese described as a "major improvements," she said, "Mostly his behavioral, his emotional state was different." She noted that "he didn't act out as much or shut down or yell and tell the teacher, 'I'm not going to read out loud' when he was confronted and made to read out loud in the classroom."

While general education teachers in both the traditional public school and the charter school forced her son to read out loud, Therese reported that she had more influence in the charter school setting. She said:

> …I would come up and talk to the teachers and say, 'Now see, if you put him on the spot that way you are not going to have a good response. This is what his ARD says you need to do. You need to pull him aside and ask him to read it back to you and repeat if necessary.' When I told them, when the teachers actually took the time to read through his file, then we had a good response.

Describing her son's behavior over the years in the charter school, Therese said, "We really had very little problem with that after we came to a charter school. He did have some. I think he spent one week in a (disciplinary program) for getting in trouble." That placement had a positive impact. "He never wanted to go back after that, so he really did well."

While charter school staff was able to curtail her son's problem behaviors, they had been on the increase in the traditional public school environment. Therese explained the difference:

> Because the teachers viewed him more as a behavior problem—let's get him isolated over here by himself and I don't think they wanted to take the time that was necessary to redirect the child and to give him his directions verbally as many times as were needed, you know, to repeat things to him. Because they wanted to say one thing and everybody do it—and that's how it's going to go. And that just didn't work for him and I imagine other children like him. That's just his experience. That's just his experience that did not work for him, that blanket teaching that, 'We are going to do page 60 and I am going to give you a lecture and I need all these questions done

today.' That just doesn't work for every student. For my own student, it didn't work, I should say.

Looking back, Therese expressed her belief that the ultimate outcomes for her son would have been dismal if he had remained in the traditional public school environment. "I really feel that had we not put him in the charter school at the age that we did, he would probably be in juvenile right now, have a major emotional disorder or something like that because I don't think that he would have had all the attention that he needed," she explained. Therese added:

> I have noticed that kids that come from the public school education, they have gone through so many years over there. They are already juniors and seniors and they have a lot of behavior problems. We happen to be on a campus where they have a (program for discipline) and it's like they have just been passed along and passed along and viewed as problems and 'They're just bad behavior children' and they've been locked up, some of them. And I really believe that's exactly what would have happened to my son had we not switched.

Therese believed that her son's problems only would have increased in that environment. "It would have gotten worse every year—his anger and his frustration, everything, his feelings of failing all the time," she said.

Happier Child/Greater Self-Esteem

In addition to improvements in behavior, each parent in this study reported that the smaller charter school setting resulted in increased self-esteem or happier children. Some parents reported a complete change in outlook, with their children becoming more confident, outgoing, and willing to speak for themselves.

Rachel, whose son had a low self-image after years of failure and abuse, reported a distinct change in his attitude. “He has matured. “He is the man of the house,” she said, explaining, “He gets things done. He does his chores without prompting. I don’t have to beg him to take a shower. He’s into his looks. He is just feeling really good about himself.”

During the time he was in traditional public school, her son spoke about himself in negative terms, saying things like “Oh I am an animal. I am a dog.” While Rachel noted that her son is older now and maturity could have been a factor as well, his self-image has improved. “He cares about himself,” she said, adding, “He is lifting weights right now. He is into bodybuilding. He just talks positive about himself.” She observed, “I am pleased with him this year.”

Likewise, Joy also reported a tremendous increase in self-esteem in her daughter upon enrollment in the charter school. Her school success “has given her a lot of confidence back that she had lost,” Joy said, adding, “And right now I can say that she is absolutely content with where she is at.” Describing the changes in her daughter’s self-concept she said, “She has regained her self-esteem. She enjoys her life better. She is not just into her inner self. Now people see it. They see the difference in her on the outside. It shows a lot better. She presents herself a lot better.” With the increase in self-confidence, Joy reported that her daughter’s personality and interests have changed. “Before she wasn’t outspoken. Now she, with the knowledge she has intaken from then till now, she is more of an outspoken person,” she explained.

In addition, Joy reported that with her burgeoning self-confidence, her daughter has expanded her interests in life. “Her self-esteem, the confidence, and all the knowledge she has taken in since she’s been here in the charter school has helped her to open her

horizons to learn about new things that before she wouldn't even give the time of day," she said. Since attending the charter school her daughter has developed a love for music including rock and roll, the Beatles, and classical music. Also, Joy observed that her daughter now loves history and antiques. Before, "it was nowhere in her interests," she explained.

Her happier disposition and increased self-confidence resulted in improved peer relationships as well. Joy commented, "Her social life here is well. She has several friends that she speaks to. They talk on a regular basis on the phone. They carry on regular conversations." Her daughter goes to the movies or dinner with these girls. Previously, in traditional public school, Joy had reported that her daughter didn't participate in lengthy telephone conversations or go on outings with persons outside her family. "And now she does that on an often basis," she said.

This sense of happiness and well-being infected the lives of both mother and daughter. She explained:

> I feel better about her life. I am more content. I have a more positive outlook as far as her life, her future is concerned. To where before I just couldn't see her being happy that she wasn't enjoying her life. Now she seems to enjoy her life. She seems to want to plan for a better future for herself and in general that makes me a lot happier and I am a lot more satisfied.

Elaborating, Joy said, "Now I feel that she has grown into a complete full adult and before I was very skeptical as far as what her future looked like." This change has given Joy peace of mind that was lacking before. She added, "I feel that whenever it is that my time comes she will live a full and happy life."

Josie also reported that her son was happier and developed better peer relationships in the charter school setting. Stressed emotionally in coping with a traditional public school atmosphere that Josie termed “abusive,” and isolated from his peers, his mother reported that by contrast “he likes to come here. He made that very clear.” She explained, “I know that he was happy at the charter school because I asked him, ‘Don’t you want to go to public school because they have a lot more programs?’ and he didn’t want that. He wanted to stay in a small scale.” She added, “He likes it better.” Peer relationships also changed for the better. Josie explained, “Here he has more friends. He’s got a few that are supposed to be good friends.”

Jean also reported that her daughter has been happier and has more friends in the charter school setting. “According to her she would rather stay there than go back to the public school because she’s got friends that are there and also she has enemies that don’t like her (at traditional public school). She is adjusted over there.” she explained. “She seems to like it. She is more happy. But she doesn’t like changes. She doesn’t want to be moved,” she observed.

Both Helena and her daughter also are happier since making the move to the charter school. “Overall she is doing OK,” she explained, adding, “She is happy here.” The change also had a positive impact in the home. Helena noted, “We are happier she is coming here. We are happier that she is happy.”

Finally, Therese reported not only a profound change in her son’s behavior, but a dramatic shift in his self-esteem as well. “As far as his comfort level, his feelings of success, I think that went up immediately. I saw an immediate difference in his self-confidence,” she said, adding, “On a personal level he doesn’t feel looked down upon as

much and he doesn't feel that people just see him as a behavior problem." She explained, "I think he feels like they care for him more as an individual."

In addition to an enhanced self-image, Therese also noted improved peer relationships in the charter school. Unlike the social isolation of traditional public school, in the charter school Therese said her son has maintained several long-term friendships. "As a matter of fact he has a group of friends that since the seventh grade they've been together and they're still together today," she commented. "His peer social, his interactions with other students—everything is just different in the charter school environment," she said, explaining, "Well, it's just more of a community and everybody gets to know each other really well and I think the kids are kinder to each other if they see that there is a difference."

Academic Improvement

In addition to reporting increased emotional well-being in their children, parents also noted academic improvement in their sons and daughters after attending a charter school. This category was not as strong a finding as the increased emotional well-being of the child. While all six parents reported happier children with an increased sense of emotional well-being in the charter school environment, only five made positive comments regarding their child's learning in the charter school.

Additionally, while some parents noted an immediate improvement in happiness, in some instances the academic growth was slower. Also, one of the parents in the study expressed concerns that her child was not learning in the charter school environment. Since parents in this study had their children enrolled in the charter school at the time of the study, for increased confidentiality parents were not identified in this or future sections, even by a pseudonym. The measure was added since the following sections

include information that is sometimes critical of charter schools. Additionally, two of the parents in this study had sons. For additional confidentiality, all references to student gender in the following sections regarding the charter schools are to females. When necessary, the word “son” was changed to “daughter” and the word “he” to “she.”

Academic improvement was slower than emotional improvement for one parent in the study who reported; “We saw a change in academics. We saw not too much of a change in her reading level, but there was a change finally—a couple of grades improvement.” She explained, “Well, her reading levels are not that good even now. It’s not that good.” However, during the past four and a half years her daughter’s reading levels improved about three to four grade levels she estimated, explaining, “As far as her academics, it was slow but sure.” This contrasted with an immediate improvement in her daughter’s self-confidence and emotional state.

Comparing her daughter’s academic success with that in traditional public school she said, “She has done a lot better in the charter schools.” The parent noted that her daughter made much better grades, currently had finished all her credits and was looking forward to graduation. “I have to say communication is the key,” this parent said. She added:

> If she got behind, the teachers would call and tell me, ‘She is behind and hasn’t turned in three or four pages. You need to ask her where they are or check her backpack.’ Or, you know, she could go weeks. I could go weeks without getting any notice in public schools.

Charter school staff also offered her daughter encouragement, which this parent says made a difference in her academic achievement. She said:

> Well, now that she has been in the charter school for so long, I think the main thing that made a difference was finding the things she is good at and allowing her to pursue

those things—like art classes, sketching and drawing, painting. Now she had art available over there (traditional public school), but it just made a bigger difference here in the charter school.

This parent noted that school staff was flexible in the approach to her daughter. She said:

> They would say things like, 'If you are on target and you've finished your work (they kept what was required of her modified), and you don't have anything to do, instead of getting bored with yourself,' they would let her go into the art room and sit with the art teacher for a while. She even helped the art teacher teach how to mix colors with the younger grades and things like that.

The charter school teacher's emphasis on the child's abilities also made a difference. "The main thing that I am trying to say is when you focus on an LD student's strengths and then give them a chance, an opportunity, to pursue their strengths then that child feels like a success," this mother said, adding, "That's what happened in the charter school environment for my daughter. That's what happened."

In addition to the focus on her daughter's strengths, this mother also noted that the school's attention to the child as an individual helped her daughter succeed academically. She explained that each student in the charter school, both in general and special education has individual academic goals for the week and the semester. She said:

> Everybody is at a different level and they (other students) are aware of that and there is no like pointing you out and saying, 'You're not at the level you are supposed to be,' because there is not a blanket teaching.

Under this approach, she said, "They give you an opportunity if you are behind to get caught up to where you are supposed to be." She concluded, "I think the bottom line is

the smaller numbers and more individualized focus for every child—where they are, what they need to accomplish, their flight plan so to speak."

This parent explained that this positive focus made a difference in her daughter's orientation towards her future following graduation. "Because we focused so much on what she can do instead of what she can not do we have really encouraged her to follow her art, her people skills. She has a lot of people skills." In addition to encouraging her art talents, in the charter school her daughter was allowed to serve food to peers in the cafeteria and tutor students in lower grades. Her daughter plans to focus on getting a cosmetology license and taking business courses on graduation.

Another parent also noted a positive change in her daughter's orientation towards life after high school since she enrolled in the current charter school. "She is talking about it (college) with someone because she is coming home and she is saying she is going to college," she said, adding, "Before it was, 'I don't care what I do. The world needs to take care of me. I am going to get a check anyway.' Now it is 'I am going to go to college and I want to get a job.' "

Since this positive attitude towards attending college has occurred since attending the current charter school, her mother is certain that personnel at the school have encouraged it. She said, "Someone is telling her. She wasn't talking about that previously so I think someone is putting it into her head that she is capable." Continuing, this mother explained, "You know she came home yesterday and 'I completed my first half of history and now I am on my second. I am going to be a senior. I can almost graduate.' " She concluded:

So someone is talking to her about you know graduation and completing her work and things like that. I can't think of that man's name. (Parent shows a piece of paper to the

researcher with the name of a special education administrator for the school). This is the man's name who is helping her out.

This parent did note that not all of her daughter's charter school experiences have been so positive. While her daughter has made academic gains in her current charter school, the parent's experience with a previous charter school in a different location was less auspicious. "My only problem was that I never received any report cards or any information and part of it could have been because my daughter is slick enough to take things out of the mailbox," she explained.

Now, not only is her daughter looking to college in the future, she is passing her subjects, unlike her experience in traditional public school where she failed academically. This parent attributes this in part to the personal attention given to her daughter at the charter school. School personnel sent home a daily note informing this parent of her daughter's academic progress. She said:

> The teachers have been very helpful. I put her on a daily schedule where, and this is a lot of work for them and I don't know if they like doing it, but she has to bring home a note daily saying exactly what she completed in school…

This system has proven successful. "As of last year she didn't earn any of her credits, which this year, this semester, she completed them all before November. All the ones she should have completed last year she completed them with that system," she said. Describing her daughter's teachers as "very cooperative," this mother indicated that they have allowed her to use textbooks at home and she sees her daughter working on schoolwork after school.

The daughter of another parent also experienced passing grades and a brighter orientation towards the future. Describing her daughter's experience academically in the charter school, this mother said:

> Things have been going uphill. She has regained her self-esteem. She is working as hard as she possibly can. It has helped her within the past three years she has accomplished what she hadn't accomplished in the past five years that she was in public school.

More focused attention from her teachers seemed to make a difference. This parent said:

> It just seems that she, it just interests her for the fact that they work with her on a more one-to-one basis to where whatever difficulties she had she could express them on a one-to-one basis to her instructors so that she wouldn't feel like an outcast because she had, she couldn't pick up whatever everybody else seemed to pick up a lot easier than she was able to.

Her daughter was unable to comprehend some of the material in the traditional public school environment and fell behind academically. Her mother explained:

> …then things changed when she came over here to the charter school. She says, 'I don't know. Maybe it is just that they take a little longer in explaining things to me. Or they just take the time to set aside and then talk to me on a one-to-one basis but I just seem to comprehend it and understand it way better then what I ever was before in any of the other schools I was in.' It is just that she seems to be able to relate to the people, her instructors more. She says she gets more as far as clarifying her explanations to where she can understand what she is trying to get over as far as understanding math, as far as whatever courses she is doing at the time.

Despite her academic improvements, math has remained problematic for this child. However, her mother noted definite improvements since enrollment in the charter school. She explained:

> Her math, that is her weak point. That is her overall weak point. She still has a lower grade level in math knowledge but we try to do more verbal work with her as far as math is concerned. They give her more time to work on math problems for the fact that she has to take a lot more time to sum them up and come out with her totals and stuff like that. To where she had completely given up on math. She didn't want to have nothing to do with math.

At the charter school her daughter changed her approach to math. This mother explained:

> She was behind as far as her basics, her timetables. Subtraction was very hard for her. Now she does simple subtraction with no problems. She does her timetables now. They are in her head and she knows them as far as you know on a questionable basis. You ask her and she spills them out. To where before and as far as she didn't want to have, she didn't like handling money at all because she really couldn't tell you what was left after you took off 60 cents off the dollar. In her head it just wouldn't come to her. And now she doesn't have a lack in confidence as far as handling money is concerned or anything like that.

Her daughter's grades also have improved dramatically. This mother explained:

> Here her grade average is within 85-90 which is a grade that she never saw when she was in public school. And I have been as amazed as her. She says, 'Mama, I can't believe that I don't have any grade lower than an 80-85.' She says, 'I think that I have accomplished quite a bit to where I was before.' I said, 'That's beyond me saying that

of course it is.' And that is another thing that I tend to do now is every time she tells me that 'I finished that module and I got a passing grade,' I compliment her and it is just completely different.

This parent reported that the charter school attended by her daughter divides academic coursework into modules. She said that this approach has proven effective. "…Those modules, the way she does those modules or booklet, she works at her own pace as fast as she can and she can do it faster," her mother said, explaining:

She can go through two modules at a time to where before it was, 'You do it. Turn it in, and, if not, you don't get no credit for it.' And here is, 'Do it at your own pace but turn it in and then you will get your grade.' So, it has worked out for her.

At the time of the interview, this student was close to graduation from high school, considering attending college. Her mother explained:

…Before she didn't see herself finishing high school let alone going into regular college courses as far as basic college is concerned. But now, yes, she is interested and she says she has already talked to counselors here. People have come in from (names of colleges) all the small community colleges and she has, she has already looked into trying to see if she can establish a connection with (name of college).

In addition, her daughter's expectations for a career also changed in the charter school. During the time she attended traditional public school, her daughter had low expectations for a career. Her mother explained, "She said, 'Well, I will see whatever job I get. I will just see where I can apply and see who is interested in taking me on.' That's not it no more." She added, "Now she has plans for her future to where before it was 'I'll take whatever comes my way.' " Contemplating her daughter's charter school experience, this

mother concluded, "…It has changed her to where you could say she has done a complete turnabout."

Another parent also noted that her daughter is performing better academically in the charter school due to increased academic flexibility. Her daughter attends school half a day, taking two subjects. "She is doing OK with the two subjects she gets. Because normally she wouldn't have done all the subjects that is being required in a regular public school," she explained. Since her daughter has ADHD, the course schedule was difficult in traditional public school. "…In a regular public school I don't think she would have functioned with all those subjects, going from class to class, and all that homework she has to bring home because she is not one to focus or do her homework," she explained. This parent added that her daughter is working and she is pleased with her academic progress in the charter school. "…She is doing her work even though sometimes she gets lazy on the side and she don't want to cooperate with the teacher. And I say, 'Well, look, you've got your part too and do what they tell you.' "

A different parent also indicated that her daughter was doing fine at this time in the charter school. This parent had reported problems with a different charter school that did not let her know when her child was failing. "…The first attempt that she went to a charter school she failed and they didn't tell me for the next year after the summer. Their excuse was that they couldn't find an address to match her card," she explained.

Despite this inauspicious beginning, this parent said her daughter transferred to the current charter school and academically improved. Speaking of the current charter school curriculum, she noted, "Self-pace is good." Her daughter made progress after the first charter school. "She is fine now. She is passing," she said, adding, "Academically, she is happy here."

Finally, one of the parents in the study expressed strong concerns regarding her daughter's academic achievement in charter school. This parent noted that the charter school has been positive in terms of her daughter's emotional/behavioral state. "It is her academics. I don't see her improving," this mother said, adding, "Maybe she is doing it all at school, but I do not see an improvement."

Her daughter reads several grade levels behind her placement and this parent noted that she has not observed an improvement in her daughter's reading ability. "…She is still struggling," this parent said. This mother noted that she expressed concerns to one of her child's teachers who indicated they would address the issue. She concluded, "She hasn't been at school too long. I can't say what, how much she has learned."

More Attention in Special Education Services

This study examined not only parental perceptions of special education services in traditional public schools but also analyzed parent reactions to the program for students with disabilities in the charter school setting. The category of more attention in special education services emerged from that analysis. Parents tended to report the same strengths in special education that they found in the charter school setting in general. That is, that the smaller size and warmer atmosphere led to increased attention and positive outcomes for their children. Five of the six parents reported improvements in the special education program in the charter school over the traditional public school they left behind. Some of the parents expressed concerns about special education services in the charter school as well. These are described in the following section. Again, to ensure confidentiality in this section, parents are not identified by pseudonym and all students are described as female.

Describing her child's experience in the charter school special education program, one parent related how her child's needs were better met in that program than in traditional public school. She explained:

> In the (charter) schools what has happened is they have been able to focus more on the children with special needs. I noticed that being it is not such a large school, I could come in and make sure that each teacher has the modifications my daughter needed and whether they were following them or not. She didn't just fall through the cracks as another number as in a larger public school. They were able to make sure that each teacher was informed of her modifications and if she needed repetition, if she needed time out, if she needed content mastery classes, if she needed to step out of the mainstream even though she was mainstreamed. If it got to the point where she was becoming too agitated, couldn't focus, they would let her step out as needed. To her benefit the special education teacher has been the same for four or five years. And so that created a good relationship foundation. Therefore, he was able to get my daughter to produce more than she actually needed to produce. And that teacher was able to make sure that every subject or concept had been mastered before moving on. Whereas if she was in the public schools as in her younger grades, they were just moving her up without really making sure.

After two years in this environment, her daughter's behaviors improved to such a degree that she no longer qualified for special education services as a student with emotional disturbance. This mother explained:

> Not until she was in the charter school I would say two years or so did she qualify for LD only and not ED because being here in a smaller environment and having the strong relationship with the special education teacher and her principal she didn't act

out any more or get so angry that she would shut down.

Charter school staff also provided her child with flexibility not available in the traditional public school. She explained:

> She has a really good gift in art. So, what they did was whenever she did have a lot of trouble they would allow her to draw and allow her to focus on her artwork and that would help her to calm down and she would redirect her anger so she no longer needed the ED qualification or classification I should say. And I believe that helped, moving to a charter school—I believe that's what helped her.

The smaller number of students in the charter school resulted in improved special education services for her daughter. Comparing the content mastery services available in traditional public school and the charter school she said, "…After seventh grade (in the charter school) it worked so much better and I do believe it was because there was a smaller number of students." This contrasted with her experience with the special education services in traditional public school. "They were not for her very effective," she said. While her daughter was able to attend content mastery classes in traditional public school, she perceived the service as a punishment in traditional public schools. "In her elementary grades (traditional public school) it was more she perceived… as this is like a bad thing, something to be ashamed of, a punishment. In her junior high years it was quite different (charter school)," she said. "She saw that as more of a privilege in the junior high grades than she did in the elementary grades," she explained.

This parent felt that the smaller size of the charter school resulted in more special education services for her daughter. She said:

> As far as what was available, like counseling and modifications and content mastery, they were equally available (between the charter school and traditional public school).

> I just think they were more available to her time wise being in a smaller school than a larger school. Say she had like three things available to her in public school, she would get the three things in charter school more often because there weren't so many people, I believe.

While size was important, the sense of community in the smaller setting also had a favorable impact on her daughter. Elaborating on the differences, she explained, "…I really believe that is just the numbers thing. And being able to build more of a relationship with her teachers and counselors and principal—because it is not such a big, big campus where you are not just a number."

The size resulted in better relationships with teachers. "…There is more access by the parent to the teacher because here the child is not just a number—they do get back to you more. They do meet with you more," she said, adding, "They do call you to come in, like your daughter is behind already five grades in history and they would let you know more." Describing this difference in greater detail, she said:

> I truly believe that the key to this whole thing whether in public school or charter schools is becoming familiar with each individual child because every child is completely different and establishing in the ARD what's needed for each child and actually following through with it.

This process was improved in the charter schools. She explained, "It was just easier access to the teachers. They were more accommodating."

This parent also felt that the charter school provided more help to her as a parent in adjusting to her child's disability. She explained:

> …the counselor would explain to me, 'This is why you are seeing this behavior in the child because of her perception of herself is this way'—and just the explanation of it

all, you know. Just, 'She can't read and she shuts down and does her art. It's because she wants to do the art because she can't do the reading. So that is why you are having this difficulty. It's not because she is lazy.' Because, as a parent, if you hear a teacher telling you, 'She's just lazy. She just doesn't want to do it and she is manipulating you,' you start to think, 'OK, well, these are professionals. I am not even educated.' And you start to believe that. Then you tell the child the same things that they are hearing at school and then the child is even more disturbed by what she hears.

Another parent felt the difference in her child's special education program in charter school was increased attention. "They have the same paperwork," she said. "But I think the people at (current charter school), maybe because it is a smaller setting are more capable of meeting her needs," she said, noting, "Whereas at the other school, it's because it was a fairly large school, she was basically a number and things would come up when there was a problem." In terms of the services in her daughter's IEP, she said, "I don't think they were being implemented." Describing the special education services her daughter received in the charter school, this mother said:

I know that she can go with the teacher. I can't think of this guy's name. There is a teacher over there who will issue her books, you know, help her if she needs help. And then I also understand that there is an aide there who she is supposed to go to and I think that some of her papers are modified because when she does bring work home she says, 'I am not supposed to do this part.' 'You are going to do that part anyway.' (laughs) So I know they are modifying her work for her.

Some services were available outside the general education classroom. This parent also explained, "I don't even know the terminology for it but she can have certain study periods where she can go and work on her stuff in a certain teacher's class."

This parent also found that special education personnel at the school listened to her concerns as a parent. She indicated at one point she addressed in an ARD committee meeting that her daughter was not doing her work in school. ARD committee members worked as a team she said to address the problem and her child improved academically as a result.

Another parent, who reported an improvement in her daughter since transferring to the charter school, described the difference in the special education program in the charter school. She said:

> As far as an overall, I consider that they do have an adequate special ed section as far as their school is concerned (traditional public school). As far as here (the charter school), well you know, I don't know, like I said, she is doing way better. Things have changed. She is a happier person altogether so I figure it is just the atmosphere of more closeness between instructors and students that has gotten her to be comfortable here.

Asked if her child were in a general education setting in the charter school, she replied, "No, no, I don't think so. I think she is in special education classes here also. I think that is correct." She went on to explain, however, that it was not important to her whether her child were in special education or general education classes but rather that she was happy and achieving academically. She explained:

> …What I look for and what I look for in her—that she is comfortable. That she is satisfied with where she is at and that is what brings her to do her work, to turn in her assignments and stuff like that because she is comfortable and she feels comfortable. It is not the fact that she had to go there because those are the only places that have those classes that are qualified for her to be in, no. No, I don't see it that way. I just

see it as if this is a place that is going to help you learn I am all for it. As long as you are not telling me, 'You know what—I quit. I want to just drop out.' Which is what I was already getting ready to hear from her and this is the one thing I did not want to hear from her.

Her daughter now is happy in school. This mother elaborated:

And now to where she doesn't have to miss. She is here on a daily basis. She is picking up information that she didn't think she was capable of getting anymore. So, I believe that it is just that she is comfortable here. 'That's fine. You learn what you need to learn. You get to graduate from there. I don't care if it is a charter school. I don't care if you are already hitting 20 years old, but you are going to accomplish your goal and that is all that matters.'

This mother did not have an opinion on the differences between special education services in the two settings. Asked to compare the amount of special education services in the traditional public school to her daughter's charter school, she replied, "I really can't say that I have, I have an opinion as far as that is concerned because it was just you know the time that it happened at her need when I looked into what was causing her problems. And to where she got better solutions here."

A different parent also indicated that she is pleased with her daughter's progress in the charter school. Comparing the level of special education services in the charter school to that of the traditional public school, she noted, "To me I think it is less (services in the charter school)." Nevertheless, this parent reported better outcomes for her daughter. She explained, "She is getting more attention here from the teachers here and more help. She can speak herself and they will try help working with her." What made the difference? "It is the attitude of the school," she said.

While she noted that special education personnel in traditional public school did not listen to her concerns in ARD committee meetings, this parent reported greater influence in the charter school. In that setting if she raised a problem, “they will look into it and they’ll see what they can do,” she said.

Another parent also reported better communication with special education personnel. Noting that special education staff did not seem concerned about the problems she raised in the traditional public school junior high, she found not only a better learning atmosphere in the charter school but that she was listened to “more so” in the ARD committee meetings as well.

Charter Schools Aren’t Perfect Either

While parents in this study all reported that the educational or emotional needs of their children were not being met in the traditional public school, sometimes charter schools fell short as well. All of the parents interviewed for this study noted improvements in the emotional well being of their child in the charter school environment and five of the six parents also had positive comments on the academic functioning of their children in charter schools. However, four of the six parents pointed out problems in their child’s current charter school as well. The category charter schools aren’t perfect either emerged from those comments.

Lack of Funding/Services

As parents transferred their children from traditional public schools to charter schools they found that they gained smaller class sizes, better teacher-pupil ratios, a “warmer atmosphere,” and more attention for their children. However, they noted giving up social, athletic, and extracurricular activities as well as some services for their child. As in the

previous sections, for increased confidentiality parents are not identified by pseudonym and all students are referred to as daughters.

One of the parents indicated her belief that the reduction in services and activities was a result of funding limitations faced by charter schools. She explained, “It is a money issue. I mean it is kind of a tradeoff. You get a better streamline as far as ratios from professor or teacher but then you don’t get all the luxuries programs which is kind of sad.” This parent expressed concerns over the absence of a school nurse at her daughter’s school and lack of staffing at the school. “At this new school, to be honest with you, this is how I feel. I don’t get feedback. I would have a problem and they would never call me back,” she said, adding, “I think it is the reduced number of people working here. The first year it’s kind of like starting over. The other school that was here last year was more organized.” Pinpointing the reason for the problem, she explained, “I think it is the funding issue.”

However, this parent indicated her belief in the worth of charter schools. She observed:

> If they were funded, if the general public were aware of them as a good thing, I am sure the ratings would go up and the money would go up because once the state sees the results they would fund them because students that are attending them are not on the street and they are not in trouble or gangs.

Another parent indicated that her daughter sometimes longs for the services available in a traditional public school and asked at times to return. She explained:

> Because she sees a lot of her friends. Well, they are not really her friends, but to her they are her friends. Say they are going to (name of traditional public high school). They have the proms. They have activities that they don’t have here and all that and

she says, ‘I have to graduate from high school. I am not going to graduate from a charter school.’

This parent responded to her daughter’s request to return to traditional public school by stating, “You can not make it in a regular school.” She noted that while the charter school did not have all the activities of traditional public school her daughter does enjoy the social activities provided by the school. She said:

> They are going to have a talent show Friday and she likes to participate in all the talent shows that they have here, the activity. She is going to be lip-syncing. She is going to be in a little skit and oh how she looks forward to that. Right away, ‘I’ve got to go get my outfit for my talent show.’ That keeps her on the go. And they have little pizza parties. She loves all that. That’s about it. But at least they have a little social thing every now and then with is good for them and for her too.

A different parent expressed her concerns over the reduction in facilities and services at the charter school. “From the football team to cosmetology, more that they have for kids (traditional public school). (They have) more things so that also they can advance themselves than the charter schools” she said, observing, “The charter schools, it’s just a school you know.”

This parent also raised concerns over school facilities and staffing needs. “I feel they need more help or I would say teachers and just staff. I have been there and it is somehow disorganized. I have seen the kids roam around where there’s no staff outside,” she said, adding, “Since they are short-staffed it is hard for me to get a hold of somebody at times.” Housing students in portable buildings did not please this parent. She explained, “… they need more space. It’s too small. Portables, no. I don’t know the numbers of kids

there or how many in a classroom. They are not a very neat and organized school. They do need more room," she said.

Finally, another parent noted the funding limitations placed on charter schools. "Because charter schools are more limited as far as finances you won't have a dive team or a swim team or a football team. About the most they (the charter school) have as far as sports is I think she has had soccer, she's had basketball and cheerleading," she said. However, the fact that traditional public schools had more activities did not result in greater participation for her daughter. She explained, "Well, being that she was viewed more as a behavior problem over there (in traditional public school) and she did not always have the passing grades-she was not able to participate." Elaborating, she noted:

> …Because if she couldn't make the passing grade she couldn't do it. And they are not going to say, 'Well, she is a LD student and you know, she has a little more trouble.' They are going to say, 'Well, too bad. You just can't do it.' So I believe she had more opportunity here to participate in what was available to her and made available to her which was not everything because of funding.

This parent noted that her daughter also sometimes missed traditional public school. She explained:

> She has expressed a desire to go back to public school several times. But I would just remind her, 'You know over there, there are so many children that academically I don't think that you can get what you need. That was our experience before.' And she will say, 'You know mom you are right and I am used to this smaller environment now and I don't think I would do very well' after she thought about it, you know. Of course I used my influence. You know and I do wish she had a lot more things available to her but, like I say, she wouldn't be able to participate anyway. So I just

think everything would be compounded because of frustration and her anger because it would be available but you wouldn't be able to participate. And then if you were viewed as a behavior problem you'd be in detention all the time and those kinds of things.

Training/Staffing Needed

Three of the six parents expressed the need for additional training for general education teachers working with students with disabilities. All of these parents noted that this lack of teacher training existed in traditional public school as well. Additionally, one parent indicated a need for a special education teacher at her daughter's school.

For example, one mother noted that some teachers in her daughter's charter school lack sufficient training to work with students with disabilities. "They need a lot of understanding, some of the teachers do, a lot of understanding for the kids," she said explaining that her daughter's teachers sometimes became frustrated because they didn't understand her disability. This mother noted that the same problem existed in traditional public school even though she felt they had more special education services than the charter school. "This is better here," she said, explaining that charter school personnel are more responsive to her when she expresses her concerns about a teacher. "They'll fix it," she said. "They'll talk to the teacher and explain the situation." Even so, she added, "I feel they should have here, they should have a special ed teacher here that will more or less intervene with the teacher that the student has and say, 'Well, this is her problem here. You need to go this way to reach her.' "

Another mother reported the need for additional academic services for her daughter at the charter school and more information as a parent on how to assist a child with disability. "If anything I would like to see more services for her even if it would be in the

evenings or me to take her to school to a program where she can sit one-on-one," she said. "Definitely she needs more services." This parent also expressed the need for more information on disability issues for parents. "The school has sometimes not enough time to have a conference with parents with disabilities. That's what I haven't seen," she said, adding that this need existed in both traditional public school and the charter school. "Give the parents, the kids have a disability, a full conference for them on what they can do, what procedures (legal) they can take, what actions." Elaborating, she explained:

> …Learning disabilities, you go to the school and they talk to you about it one time with an ARD and to me it is not enough. To me I feel like getting the parents with the kids with disabilities maybe once every three months or classes, taking the child one evening. You know, that would be very helpful.

Finally, a different mother noted that in both the charter school and traditional public school she had to ensure that general education teachers were following her child's IEP. However, she had more of an influence in the charter school environment. She explained:

> But I have found that even in charter schools I've had to go to each teacher individually and make sure that they read her IEPs and her modifications. And I as a parent had to make sure they would take the time to repeat questions, to give directions orally, to even test her orally. Nobody ever wanted to test her orally because they thought she was just abusing the system. Even in charter schools the teachers, like general ed teachers, since she was a mainstream student with just a few minutes a day to go to her CMC classes, even they, they just thought 'Oh, she just doesn't want to do her work' until I would go and make sure that they read through all of that. Then they were like, 'OK, she really does need that.' Especially because she was pretty articulate and pretty bright.

This parent expressed a need for additional training on disability issues for teachers in both charter and traditional public schools. She said:

> I don't think that they were trained properly to deal with each individual child and to tell you the truth in the entire schools the general ed teachers need a little more training as to maybe recognize when a child might have a special ed problem or they need to be told that they are to emphasize going through each child's ARDs and finding out what each child needs in the class. That is something that wouldn't get done unless I made sure that they did it. Even in the charter schools I have to go to the teachers and say, 'This is what she needs.' And I don't know it is supposed to be that way or I'm just that kind of parent that wants to make sure, you know.

Despite the problems she sometimes encountered with general education teachers in the charter school environment this parent found that, unlike traditional public schools, she could influence school personnel to solve the difficulty. She explained that in the charter school:

> One of us would catch her. 'OK, this is not working, let's do something else.' And a lot of times it was really having to tell the general education teachers since she was mainstreamed, 'You need to go back and look at the ARD because this is what she needs. Now if you make her read out loud and you confront her in front of everybody then you are not going to get a good response. She is going to act out.'

In the charter school setting she found that teachers considered her concerns. "You are heard. You are not just listened to real quick," she said, explaining, "The partnership or network of teachers, parents, counselor, principal, student, and peers—all of that is a tighter net. So I felt that my child didn't slip through, like one of us always caught something."

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

This chapter begins with an overview of the findings from parent interviews that is followed by a description of the limitations of the study. The remainder of the chapter provides a discussion of the research findings and significance. Existing literature on charter schools is discussed relative to the major findings from this study.

Overview

Charter school critics, gazing through an educational crystal ball, divined a public school disaster where charter schools "creamed" (Smith, 2001) the best and brightest students from the honor rolls of campuses across America, further weakening a system already battling gangs, drugs, violence, and leaden under the heavy weight of public criticism. Sadly, the parents of students with disabilities in this study reported an entirely different kind of public school nightmare. Without exception, the traditional public school reality facing these parents was one of desperation rather than achievement. Far from basking under the glow of honor societies and awards, looking towards a future bright with the promise of college and career, these children were, in the words of one parent, "falling through the cracks," struggling in what another described as "this dark period in her life."

In fact, the singular theme central to all parent interviews in this study was that the traditional public school setting did not meet the needs of their children with disabilities. Parents, facing a desperate educational situation in which their children were failing academically, losing self-esteem, or veering into trouble, sought educational solutions for their children. Generally unaware of the charter school option, parents and children

continued struggling within the traditional public school setting or tried home or private schooling until they learned of the charter school choice.

Once enrolled in the charter school, the smaller setting produced a transforming effect upon all the students in this study. While the stories were unique to the individuals involved, all parents reported gains in social/emotional functioning after their children crossed the charter school threshold and most reported improvements in academic functioning as well. In some instances parents reported that the "welcoming atmosphere" and small scale of the schools contributed to dramatic results for their children. For example, the mother who described her child as "falling through the cracks" in traditional public school characterized his experience in charter schools as "a complete change." Likewise, the parent who labeled her child's years of despair and failure in traditional public school as "this dark period in her life," described her daughter as having "done a complete turnabout" since entering a charter school.

While parents without exception cited school size as a critical factor in their child's transformation, other factors contributed to the positive outcomes as well. Parents noted their children received greater attention in the charter school. Teachers listened and were better able to find "the root" of a child's learning difficulty. Parents reported a greater sense of empowerment in this environment as well. School personnel were more willing to listen to their concerns and follow through with action. Sometimes, school staff was willing to go to extra lengths to assure success and meet a parent's concerns, such as sending a daily note home for a high school student. Also, parents described a warmer atmosphere in the charter schools; words such as "caring" and "welcoming" were used. Sometimes parental comments sounded almost like the theme for the television show Cheers, "where everybody knows your name." As one parent said, "I call and everybody

knows who he is." This contrasted with this parent's impressions of the traditional public school: "I just felt like he was a number there. He was just lost in the shuffle."

This is not to say that parents bashed traditional public school or experienced everything in that setting as negative. While some parents did note an "attitude" in certain individuals, generally parents attributed educator lapses to being "overwhelmed," or to district attempts to deal with urban pressures such as gangs and violence. Parents noted that some traditional public school teachers and administrators worked to help their children. However, even those parents with more positive impressions of traditional public school staff and programs found that school size impaired effective interventions for their children. Despite the best intentions of traditional public school personnel, these children continued to struggle emotionally and academically in that environment.

Limitations of the Study

Charter schools are located throughout the state of Texas, both in heavily populated urban areas and in smaller rural communities. While there were reasons noted by the researcher for confining the study to one large urban area in the state, this decision also created potential limitations. Since the pool of participants was geographically limited, the data collected did not allow for the experiences of parents of students with disabilities who have children in different geographic regions of the state and in smaller, more rural areas. Additionally, the context of this study examined the perceptions of parents of students with disabilities who had made a choice to leave their children in charter schools for at least one year. Different results may have been obtained had the study examined the perceptions of parents who chose to return their children to traditional public schools after at least a year in a charter school environment.

Research Findings and Significance

Parental Dissatisfaction with Traditional Schools

Although research of parents of students with disabilities in charter schools is limited, researchers who examined the topic found that parental dissatisfaction with traditional public schools was the reason for transfer to charter schools (Hawkins-Pammer, 2000; Lange & Lehr, 2000). Parents in this study likewise reported that they left traditional public schools because the needs of their child, both emotional and academic, were not being met in that setting.

All of the parents in this study noted that their children's emotional needs were not being met in traditional public school. Each parent in this study reported that their child was unhappy in that setting and all but one of the parents reported that their children suffered from low self-esteem. The manifestations of emotional problems differed depending on the child. Some children were placed on medication. One parent reported that her child's emotional difficulties became so severe that hospitalization was required. She explained, "She would push me. There was one time that she could get a knife and, you know, I had to watch my back because she got real bad. At that time she was taking five prescriptions." Some "shut down" emotionally, simply attending classes but not participating. Others acted out, skipping school, becoming involved in conflict at home or school, or veering towards crime. One parent reported that her son's self-esteem had sunk so low that he made remarks such as "Oh, I am an animal. I am a dog."

Further, every parent reported problems in the learning environment in traditional public school. Five of the six parents reported that their children were failing academically. All of the parents noted that their children were not learning necessary academic skills. Academic failure fueled the emotional anguish and feeling of

hopelessness experienced by some of the children. As one parent noted, “She felt like ‘I got left behind and I am never going to get to the front seat.’ ” Both parents and children had begun to despair that high school graduation was unlikely, much less college attendance. One mother expressed her anxiety about her daughter’s future at that time. She worried, “I guess I am going to have to stand behind her and make sure she is going to have something to fall back on because if I am not there I don’t think she is going to have a security blanket.”

While parents related that traditional public schools were not meeting the needs of their child, they generally were not overly harsh in their descriptions of staff and administrators in that setting. Overall they noted that traditional public school personnel struggled with issues such as gangs, discipline, and large of numbers of students. Although some instances of negative attitudes were reported, parents generally described traditional public school personnel as overwhelmed rather than indifferent. Parents used words like “He was a number there. He was lost in the shuffle.” However, regardless of whether parents described school personnel in positive or negative terms, the outcome for each of the six parents in this study was the same. The situation had become desperate by the time they decided to transfer their children to a charter school.

Implications

While parents in this study were most assuredly dissatisfied with outcomes for their children, overall they did not join the ranks of those who would bash educators in traditional public schools. Instead, they noted that the large urban traditional public school environment did not meet the needs of their child. Size was repeatedly noted as a problem. Also, parents described educators as overburdened in dealing with large numbers of students, gangs, and truancy in this metropolitan environment. In this setting

parents reported that educators were unable to provide the attention, motivation, and discipline necessary to meet both the emotional and learning needs of these children. While some children may thrive in the traditional public school setting, most of these parents reported that their children were well on their way to becoming a criminal justice system or dropout statistic. Also, while some critics expressed fears that charter schools would "cream" the best and brightest students from the ranks of traditional public schools (Smith, 2001), parents in this study proved them wrong. Rather than trading up to a charter school, these parents were simply seeking higher ground.

Parental Satisfaction with Charter Schools

While research related in this chapter indicated parents were unhappy with traditional public schools, they gave high marks to charter schools. This finding paralleled previous research results (Hawkins-Pammer, 2000; Lange & Lehr, 2000). In a Minnesota study, researchers found that 72 % of parents of students with disabilities who responded to a survey reported higher levels of satisfaction with the special education services at their child's charter school (Lange& Lehr, 2000). In Texas charter school researchers also found that parents in general (parents of students with disabilities were not singled out) gave high marks to their children's charter schools (Weiher et al., 2002). In the fifth year of the five-year study commissioned by the state, about 62 % of parents gave their child's charter school an A and about 28 % gave their child's charter school a B (Weiher et al., 2002). This was in contrast to their grading of traditional public schools, with only 28 % of parents assigning their child's previous school with a grade of A and 43 % giving the school a B (Weiher et al., 2002). In another Texas study, the researcher found that parents of students with disabilities also generally gave high marks to charter schools for services they were providing to their children (Maughan, 2001).

Likewise, parents of students with disabilities in this study reported gains in both emotional and academic domains once their child entered the charter school. All parents reported emotional improvements in their children in the smaller atmosphere of the charter school. Parents related that their children were happier, more self-confident, and had brighter outlooks on the future since entering charter schools. No parent reported serious emotional or behavioral problems in their child at the time of the study. This contrasted to reports of truancy, acting out, flirting with criminal activity, and hospitalization for emotional problems that had plagued some of these children while enrolled in traditional public school. Parents described situations in traditional public school in which their children were treated like a "behavior problem," yelled at, or blamed for their emotional or academic difficulties.

Overall parents found that traditional public school district personnel either did not listen to their complaints or failed to follow up with effective action. By contrast, parents in this study reported that they were listened to and treated with respect in ARD committee meetings at the charter school. Further, parents reported that their concerns were met with action. One parent related that the charter school allowed her child to draw, which helped in times of emotional stress. Another parent reported that school personnel sent a daily note for her son outlining his behavioral and academic progress for the day.

In terms of academic functioning, all but one parent in the study reported gains in academic achievement since entering the charter school although sometimes this was slower than the improvements in emotional functioning. Parents reported that students were passing, learning concepts, and looking ahead to a future that included college or trade school. The emotional gains seemed to promote academic functioning as all of the

parents reported that their children were attending school and happier emotionally. Three of the parents reported that their children now are enthusiastic about graduation and talking about college.

Implications

Parents reported that size of the charter school made a big difference in outcomes for their child. Although every parent in the study noted positive improvements from the smaller setting, these parents reported that success as more than sheer numbers alone. Attitude and programming also got high marks. Administrator interviews revealed a passion for serving at-risk students. Parental comments overall echoed that zeal. They reported that in the charter school their children were not treated as "just a number" or a "behavior problem." They said that both administrators and staff listened to their concerns and followed through with action. "They do listen here," one parent commented, contrasting that to her daughter's traditional public school, where "they weren't listening to me or to her."

Charter schools personnel not only listened to parents, but they received praise for following through with needed programming. Specialized programming for students with behavioral difficulties received repeated praise from parents at one charter school and parents at both schools praised the individual attention provided to their children. Parents also reacted favorably to the self-paced curriculum that allowed a student to work at their own level and rapidly make up lost credits. These comments indicate that not just sheer numbers alone, but care, attention, attitude, and programming worked together to foster student gains.

Special Education

Existing research literature was very limited on the reasons parents of students with disabilities placed their children in charter schools (Lange & Lehr, 2000). In the few studies that dealt with the topic, researchers found high levels of parental dissatisfaction with traditional public schools and satisfaction with charter schools (Hawkins-Pammer, 2000; Lange & Lehr, 2000). While research specifically targeting parents of students with disabilities in Texas charter schools was even scarcer, Maughan (2001) found that parent participants generally gave high marks to charter schools. In that study parents cited class size, interpersonal skills of staff, and individualized assistance as charter school strengths.

Researchers in a Minnesota study noted an interesting observation regarding services for students with disabilities in that state (Lange & Lehr, 2000). While parents of students with disabilities reported that their children received high levels of special education services in their charter schools, charter school directors had reported that the schools in fact were offering fewer special education services than their traditional public school counterparts. Study authors noted that the study raised "interesting questions about what parents consider important" (Lange & Lehr, 2000, p.150). They observed, "Survey responses and comments from parents of students with disabilities who attend charter schools suggest that parents may be interpreting 'good service' as one where their child receives individual attention, and staff members respond to their concerns and needs" (p.150).

Parents of students with disabilities in this study reported that the special education services provided in traditional public school were either problematic or ineffectual in meeting the needs of their children. Five of the six parents in this study questioned whether their child was in fact receiving a service designated in their IEP. Some of the

parents reported that their children were not allowed to leave the general education classes to receive pullout services in a content mastery center (CMC). One parent reported that sometimes the CMC was treated as a punisher for her child. Another parent reported that needed speech services, while available on campus, were denied to her child because the class was full. Two of the mothers felt that the special education program in traditional public school was good overall, but fell short in meeting the needs of their particular child.

Additionally, these parents noted that some of the problems that plagued traditional public schools in general also negatively impacted special education services. Parents reported that their children were not receiving enough individual attention in their special education classrooms as teachers attempted to deal with large numbers of sometimes unruly students.

Sadly, sometimes parents reported that special education services in traditional public school were actually harmful to their child. Two of the parents in the study reported very negative outcomes for their children in a special education classroom. In one case the parent said her child was “treated like a discipline problem” in that classroom and in another case the mother reported that her daughter was tormented by her peers during class while the teacher ignored her anguish. Also, parents sometimes found that teachers and administrators in traditional public schools did not listen to their concerns in ARD committee meetings, blaming the child for his or her problems and failing to take action on concerns raised by parents.

By contrast, overall parents in this study found that charter school staff was responsive to the needs of their children. They felt treated with respect and listened to in ARD committee meetings. They reported that staff and administrators took action on their

concerns. Further, parents indicated that the smaller class size made a difference in the amount of service that a child received. One mother noted, “As far as what was available, like counseling and modifications and content mastery, they were equally available (between the charter school and traditional public school). I just think they were more available to her time wise being in a smaller school than a large school.” She explained, “Say she had like three things available to her in public school, she would get the three things in charter school more often because there weren’t so many people, I believe.”

Implications

Sometimes, more does not mean better. The mere presence of a full continuum of special education services in traditional public school did not translate into improved outcomes for these children with disabilities. First, parents noted that despite what was written on the IEP or present within the school, their child did not always receive the special education service. Second, even if the child did receive the service, it was not necessarily a positive experience. Two of the parents who described what would appear to be a self-contained setting (their children were in special education all day) told horror stories of their child being embarrassed in the classroom and made to feel like a discipline problem or, in the other case, continually taunted by peers in the presence of the teacher. Another parent described frustrations with the ‘low expectations’ for her child with a teacher providing her son an answer key.

In response to the question raised by earlier researchers on what parents consider important (Lange & Lehr, 2000), these parents placed a greater emphasis on the bottom line of whether their child’s emotional and academic needs were being met than the presence or absence of a broad continuum of services. They were more preoccupied with questions such as “Is my child happy?,” “Is my child off the streets, out of trouble, and in

school?," and "Is my child learning?" The overall well being of their child was more important to them than the schedule of services listed on an IEP. One mother explained her feelings about the importance of a continuum of services in this fashion:

> …what I look for and what I look for in her—that she is comfortable, that she is satisfied with where she is at. And that is what brings her to do her work, to turn in her assignments and stuff like that, because she is comfortable. It is not the fact that she had to go there because those are the only places that have those classes that are qualified for her to be in, no. No, I don't see it that way. I just see it as if this is a place that is going to help you learn, I am all for it.

These findings suggest that the mere presence of a continuum of services is less important to individual student success than whether a child's emotional and academic needs are being met. The fact that a school has five instructional settings on a campus means little if one's child only needs one. Further, the presence of a continuum on paper did not translate into its actual availability for these individual children. That speech services are available on campus is of little value if one is told that the class is full.

Also, the availability of a particular setting does not necessarily translate into effective outcomes for an individual child. Enrollment in a self-contained classroom is hardly a plus if, as in this study, one's child is so tormented in that setting that they lose self-esteem or feel the need to literally run away from school.

Current Periodic Literature and Standardized Testing

In the few months that elapsed from interviewing parents until the conclusion of the study, newspaper headlines and editorials have kept the charter school issue in the public eye in Texas. On July 2, the Austin American-Statesman newspaper reported that the founder of a Houston charter school, his wife and two relatives were indicted on federal

charges of embezzling more than $3.3 million in federal and state monies (Lozano, 2004) and on August 22 the same newspaper reported that the Travis County District Attorney had opened a criminal investigation into the finances of a now defunct Austin charter school (Martinez, 2004). On the editorial page of that day's edition, the Austin American-Statesman issued a call for state and national authorities to tighten the reins on charter schools. The editorial urged, "Texas and other states must move expeditiously to shut down poor charter schools and tighten oversight of all charter schools to protect the public's investment, as well as the children enrolled in the schools" ("Poor charter schools," 2004). The editorial quoted state and national testing results and stated, "Charter school students are doing worse than their counterparts in public schools" (August 22, 2004, p. H2).

Parents in this study did not indicate that charter schools were perfect. However, in not one instance did a parent of students with disabilities initiate a discussion of standardized testing results as a measure of their child's success or failure. Overall, parents in this study seemed unclear either on the tests administered to their children or their outcome. One parent expressed her feelings on the standardized tests that are the bulwark of Texas' system of accountability in these words: "When he was at (traditional public school) and the other school all I could think about was 'Is he at school? 'Did he set fires? Is the little girl pregnant?' You know, those are my main concerns. It isn't the testing scores."

Implications

Problems in various charter schools throughout the state would indicate that legislators and the state education agency must continue to monitor charter schools to ensure that the educational vision that led to their creation translates into a viable alternative for student

learning. Certainly the state education agency and Texas legislature must take whatever steps are necessary to ensure fiscal and academic accountability for charter schools. That said, the results of this study suggest that policymakers need to look beyond standardized test scores in determining the worth of charter schools as an educational alternative. The parents in this study reported real life gains in human achievement that do not readily lend themselves to paper and pencil measures. Issues such as a child's happiness, their self-esteem, whether they are acting out, shutting down, skipping school, flirting with crime, taking medication, or hospitalized for emotional difficulties aren't typically measured on standardized tests. Yet these issues are of primary importance in measuring the overall well being of a child and success of a school.

Policymakers wrestling with this issue must bear in mind that these parents felt their children were rapidly on the way to a final exit through schoolhouse doors and wouldn't have been a part of the testing system at all if it hadn't been for their child's charter school. It is important to note that in Maslow's hierarchy of needs safety and belonging come before self-actualization (1954) and on the path of life human life infants crawl before they toddle. For these parents, seeing their children willingly walk through the schoolhouse doors was no small achievement in and of itself.

Further, results of this study seem to suggest that these parents of students with disabilities did not attach the same importance to statewide testing results as lawmakers, policy makers, and the state education agency. In general, these mothers were not well versed on either the testing instrument administered to their child or how well they performed. This study would suggest the need for further studies examining the knowledge of, meaning, and value parents of students with disabilities attach to statewide testing in Texas.

Knowledge of Charter Schools

Existing literature on parental knowledge of the charter school alternative in Texas prior to this study indicated that parents generally lacked knowledge of the charter school choice (Weiher et al., 2002). Those researchers did not specifically study parents of students with disabilities in Texas charter schools, but did conduct telephone interviews of parents of students in charter schools and also a comparison group of parents that had children attending traditional public schools in geographic areas that also had charter schools. Findings from that study indicated that parents of students enrolled in the charter schools were most likely to have learned of the school choice from friends or relatives. Comparison group parents who were aware of the existence of charter schools also were most likely to have learned of their presence in this manner. However, researchers found that throughout the five years of the study the majority of traditional public school parents interviewed indicated that they had never heard of charter schools. Study authors concluded that it appeared that the public was unaware of the charter school choice (Weiher et al., 2002).

Parents of students with disabilities interviewed for this study indicated a lack of knowledge regarding the charter school option for their children during their years of struggle in traditional public school. Parents stated that they either had no knowledge of charter schools or possessed limited information on the subject. They learned of the charter school alternative from neighbors, friends, church members, an educational organization, and their child's traditional public school. In some instances these children experienced years of academic failure and emotional difficulties before their parents became aware of the charter school choice.

Implications

The charter school movement is an outgrowth of the broader school reform movement that swept through this country in recent decades. Parental choice is a cornerstone of that movement. Yet, parents of students with disabilities in this study related stories of their children struggling for years in traditional public schools, unaware of any viable educational alternative. A choice that parents are unaware of amounts, in effect, to no choice at all. The results of this study reinforce the need for greater dissemination of information to the public regarding the charter school alternative.

Charter Schools Aren't Perfect Either

While existing research indicated high levels of parental satisfaction with charter schools, researchers noted that parents also indicated areas of concern. Maughan (2001) found that parents of students with disabilities in Texas charter schools indicated the following areas of concern or change: provision of more individual assistance, more certified staff, and more consistent implementation of student IEPs. In her concluding remarks Maughan (2001) said, "Charter schools are under staffed and under budgeted to meet the needs of students with disabilities. Although some charter schools are contracting for services and others are developing cooperatives, there are students with disabilities not currently served by certified special education teachers" (p.82).

Additionally, lack of funding for charter schools was cited as a problem in the five year study described earlier (Taebel & Daniel, 2002). That research group conducted surveys of charter school directors in Texas. They found that charter school directors cited funding as the number one challenge faced in opening charter schools. Inadequate school facilities followed second as a problem listed by directors in opening new schools. After the charter schools had been in operation for two or more years, directors moved

inadequate facilities to the front of the list of problems and inadequate operating funds dropped to third place following lack of time for planning (Taebel & Daniel, 2002).

While administrator challenges in operating a charter school were not a focus of this study, some parents noted lack of funding/services as a problem in their child's charter school. They commented that placing their children in a charter school resulted in sort of a "tradeoff" between smaller class size and greater individual attention versus a reduced number of programs and activities. Parents attributed this tradeoff to lack of funds available to the charter school. Despite the warmer charter school atmosphere, parents observed that students did not have available to them such activities as proms, cosmetology courses, a school nurse, football, or swimming teams. One parent lamented that her child's charter school was housed in portable buildings and felt the school needed more room. Another parent expressed safety concerns over the lack of a school nurse.

Some of the parents of children with disabilities in this study also expressed a desire for additional training for general education staff working with students with disabilities. One parent specifically felt that the charter school needed a special education teacher on staff. Parents found that while the needs of their child were better met in the charter school environment, that choice was not without a price.

Implications

The purpose of this study was not to evaluate the effectiveness of charter schools in Texas. Instead, this study sought to ascertain parental perceptions of traditional public schools and charter schools in terms of their services to students with disabilities. Ironically, while Maughan (2001) found that charter schools were under staffed and under budgeted to meet the needs of students with disabilities, parents had another impression. Despite the limitations of charter schools noted by parents, all found that they

did a better job than traditional public schools in meeting the needs of their children. However, since this study did not undertake an examination of the effectiveness of charter schools in meeting the needs of students with disabilities, additional research is needed in this area. It is suggested that future researchers integrate parent interviews on their perceptions of students and charter school effectiveness with a quantitative analysis of data on their children such as the students' Full and Individual Evaluation, standardized testing scores, the students' IEP, portfolios, and other indicators of student achievement and school effectiveness.

APPENDIX A

PILOT QUESTIONS FOR PARENTS

1. Why did you decide to transfer your child to this charter school?
2. What were the special education services that your child was receiving in the traditional public school?
3. What instructional settings was your child receiving service in their previous public school (i.e. self-contained, resource, content mastery, mainstreamed)?
4. What traditional public school did your child most recently attend?
5. What is your child's disability?
6. Was your child receiving a related service in their previous school? (i.e. counseling, occupational therapy, physical therapy)
7. Was your child receiving additional instruction in such areas as speech, vision, or hearing in their previous school?
8. What are the special education services your child is receiving in the charter school?
9. What do you feel are the differences, if any, between special education services your child received in their previous school and that your child is receiving in the charter school?
10. What is the level of happiness of your child emotionally now as compared with their previous school?
11. How is your child performing academically in the charter school as compared to the traditional school? (i.e. school grades, statewide achievement tests such as TAKS/TAAS/SDAA)

12. What type of instructional setting is your child being serviced in the charter school (i.e. self-contained, resource, content mastery, mainstream)?
13. Is your child receiving a related service in the charter school? (i.e. counseling, occupational therapy, physical therapy)
14. Is your child receiving additional instruction in such areas as speech, vision, or hearing in the charter school?
15. Are there any special education services that your child received in their previous school that they are not receiving in the charter school?
16. Are there any special education services that your child is receiving in the charter school that were not available in their previous school?

APPENDIX B

As noted in chapter three, five administrator/staff members from two different charter schools in the state of Texas were interviewed on site for this study. These administrators provided information on the specific special education services offered on the charter school campus and the philosophy undergirding educational approaches. For confidentiality, the schools are identified as charter school number one and charter school number two. As explained in chapter three, both charter schools provide educational services within a major metropolitan area in the state of Texas with a population of over 500,000. Although both administrators and staff members were interviewed in group interviews, for increased confidentiality, they are not named and are referred to only as an administrator.

Special Education Services

Administrators at the two schools described the special education services available at each school. At charter school number one administrators indicated that the school has two certified special education professionals on staff. One serves as a teacher and the other is a special education coordinator who also works with students. In addition, there are two paraprofessionals and one clerk who work in special education. Administrators at that school said that teacher to pupil ratios overall at that school were about 1-20.

Administrators at that campus indicated that the majority of students are served in a mainstream setting with students pulled-out for help as needed into a resource classroom. In addition, inclusion support is provided in the general education classroom. Administrators reported that the majority of students in the special education program have learning disabilities, followed by emotional disturbance. A smaller number of

students have been identified as other health impaired and there are a very small number of students with speech impairments.

In addition to the special education services described above, a licensed specialist in school psychology provides diagnostic and testing services on a contractual basis. A speech pathologist provides contracted services to students on campus two days a week.

One of the administrators indicated that counseling services would be offered after the upcoming school break. Asked about the presence of a self-contained classroom setting on the campus, one administrator said, "At this campus we have not yet determined that to be a need." Another administrator added, "The population here has not indicated a need at this time. It is something I think we always have to be mindful of."

This administrator indicated that there are materials and space available if there were a need to place students in a more restrictive setting. She explained:

> At this point I have not been made aware that this would be needed. What we have kind of discovered in a kind of strange phenomenon, the special ed population tends to be higher in the charter school than in the traditional public school. We run 20-25 percent of our kids in special ed. And one of the interesting things is we can get kids that come to us from other districts and they are coded 42s, 43s, and in a lot of resource classes. And that is one of the reasons that the kids have expressed to me that they wanted to leave their school. They didn't like going to all those dumb classes you know none of their friends were in. You know everybody knew that they were, you know everybody thought that they were dumb because they went down this hall or that. And by changing to some materials that are, while they are age-appropriate as far as the course content…but the reading level is on the third to fourth grade level.

This administrator further explained student programming. She said:

> The content is there. We do not meet 100 percent of the (Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills) TEKS with those, but we meet more than 70 percent of the TEKS with those materials. And so our students are able to take their self-paced programming materials and function well in the mainstream environment or with the support of inclusion.

In addition to the curriculum, one administrator noted that the philosophy of working with students with disabilities in the charter school differs from what he experienced in traditional public schools. He said:

> One of the things that is real important for me as an educator, as an administrator, as the parent of a child with a special need. I have a philosophy that I'll give these children respect. If I'll give it away to them, they will give it back. And what I am seeing is a lot of our special education students in a previous public school that I worked in, it was known among the faculty—there was the academic wing and the special ed wing. That was the way it was referred to and it was just a thorn in my flesh. And I have been in several schools and it has been touted, 'Well, there's the academic wing and there's the other one.' And I despise that type of mentality, this divided brain mentality if you will because I want these children when they walk out of here, when they leave my room, I don't want to ever do anything to one of those children where they feel that they have been put down, they have been treated as a substandard individual. And you want to find me get on a teacher, as an administrator, you want to find me get upset with a faculty member, and I have not had that happen here, but where I worked previously in some of the public schools I had to have some heart to hearts as a special ed teacher and probably to be honest with you I stepped over the line because I got in some teachers faces about 'Don't talk to my children that

way. Don't treat my special education students like that.' I am not seeing any of that here.

This administrator added that the building principal treats all students with respect. Describing the approach on campus, he said, "I am not going to do it and I am not going to tolerate anybody…other than treating a child like they are a special individual with a special need who is worthy of respect and we are going to treat them fair. We are going to treat them kind." Elaborating on that theme, a different administrator noted, "There is not a perception 'Those are your kids. These are my kids.' " She observed, "They are all of our kids."

Administrators at charter school number two described a somewhat different instructional program in special education. All students with disabilities are served in the general education setting and there were no special education teachers on staff at the time of the administrator interviews. Describing the services, she said, "We don't have a big room or anything like that. Everybody has to dance the same dance." Administrators on that campus indicated that teacher-pupil ratios are about 1-18 overall, but by the time student absences and teacher facilitators are factored in, the ratios are closer to 2-18.

Special education services on that campus are provided on a contractual basis. According to administrative interviews three different educational diagnosticians work with the school. In addition a contracted special education teacher comes to the campus every six week to assist with special education services. An administrator explained, "(Name of teacher) come in every six weeks and talks to each teacher about each child and what they need and if there is any you know modifications and how they are going to modify and what they modify and all of that."

While all students with disabilities were served in a mainstream setting, modifications were made as needed, she said. This administrator explained that contract and full-time staff work to determine the particular needs of an individual child. Asked how they would handle a situation where a child with disabilities was having academic difficulties, she said:

> Well, we would get everybody (names contract staff). Everybody sits down, 'OK, what can we do? What is the problem?' Some we have to make tapes. I have one person that is taping the modules and then we will have it on tape and like I have one kid right now that we are just starting very basic with the As and Bs and you know the sounds and stuff like that and we just give that kind of paperwork out.

Asked how students with disabilities were doing in the charter school's academic program, she said, "Surprisingly well, because they go at their own pace with the modules. And we have all the modules look alike so that nobody knows who gets a special module and who doesn't get a special module." She added, "The teachers know and (the special education teacher) knows because they create the special modules, but they all have the same color. They are all kept in the same area."

Like administrators at charter school number one, an administrator at charter school number two said that some students indicated that they did not like being in special education programs in traditional public school. She explained:

> A lot of the stories we get from the kids when they register or the parents, they don't let us know right away if they are special ed and then after we get the transcripts the transcripts will tell you if they are special ed or not so that is when we hold a temporary ARD and bring it up and they say, 'The reason we don't want to say anything is because I'm embarrassed to be in a special education class because all the

> kids know when they pull you out. They know you are special ed.' And then, in return, the parents or the students they tell us once they've been here they say that what they like about it is 'You can't tell if I'm special ed or not and nobody knows and I like that because I get to be with all the other kids and I don't get pulled out and nobody knows that you are special ed.'

Students with disabilities at this charter school are fully included in all activities. "Everybody gets tutored around here and the kids do it with kids sometimes. Everybody is always helping somebody so it is not like a new experience. And even for cakes and parties everybody is the same," she said, adding "We don't have a special ed party. For a birthday, everybody gets a piece of cake." Continuing, she explained:

> One thing is it is not going to be a cookie-cutter type of thing and we want to help and we want you to do it right and one thing I tell all of my teachers too is like you pretend like that is your baby sitting on the other side and what would you do for your child? 'Well I'd do this.' OK, well then do it. What makes it different? To me all kids are the same.

A different administrator noted a difference in how parents perceive ARD committee meetings at the charter school compared to traditional public school. She explained:

> I have never been to any other special ed meetings at other schools but when the parents come over here they are kind of tense when the meeting starts but then they relax and they are like surprised that you show an interest in my child. 'The other schools, they won't listen to me or they gang up on us or, and I just wanted to get out of there.' When we are here at the meetings we get the parents to open up and talk about the student and how they feel. And a lot of kids do very well once they get here and it is surprising.

Charter School Administrators' Philosophy/Attitude

Administrators at both charter schools indicated a willingness to serve the at-risk students that walk through their doors. At charter school number one, an administrator indicated:

> The philosophy has always been we will do whatever we need to do to help the student. If they call and say they don't have a ride to school, somebody is going to get them. If they want attention because emotionally they are having some problems at home then when they get to school we are going to give them attention. We are going to do whatever we need to do for the students and with their academics.

Another administrator at that school explained that the school attempts to meet the emotional needs of the child. He said:

> One of the things also that I think we take into consideration is if a child comes in and they do have some type of an emotional issue that has got them all upset we realize that we have to deal with the emotional issue because until we deal with it we are not going to be able to help educate the child. It is just usually these things are so overwhelming to the individual, at least it seems to me, but they are so overwhelmed by these things that until we help to address that issue then the child is not going to be receptive for academics.

Administrators further described their approach to working with at-risk students. A different administrator noted, "Most of the kids, I mean we talk about having at-risk campuses. I tell people that we have a high-risk campus because these kids are actually in there." He added, "They are actually operating in their chaotic state." Finally, a third administrator at that campus noted that the concern for at-risk children extends to the

highest level of administration of the charter school. She said, "…every single one of them is committed to at-risk kids. That's where their heart is."

One of the administrators at charter school number one noted that while initially traditional public school administrators were concerned that charter schools would take the highest achieving students, the reality was quite different. He explained:

> I think for so long charter schools were viewed by and I think initially by public schools as systems set up to cream, to take the cream of the crop away from regular public schools. And that first year it never happened. As a matter of fact charter schools were getting more at-risk kids. And I saw that over the first year we were in existence here with the (name of the charter school).

Seeing that need, that administrator noted that the charter school attempted to develop educational strategies to meet the needs of that population. Specialized programs at the charter school were added to meet the needs of at-risk students and students with disciplinary issues, he added.

Administrators at charter school number two also expressed a strong willingness to serve the needs of students. Describing the school's philosophy, one administrator noted, "We just do what is best for the child. It is like your baby. If it was your kid what would you do for that baby?" She added, "And most of us are women so we all have a motherly instinct…and it is a happy quiet place. It's not loud. The reason I say that is because people have commented, 'You have how many kids in there?' " Another administrator added, "We've had students that were defiant, not special ed, but other kids and they leave and go back to another school and a couple of weeks later or a month later they are back. 'Please let me in. I don't like the other school. They don't pay attention to me.' "

Further describing the school atmosphere, an administrator said, “We have a Christmas activity. We have Thanksgiving, Valentine’s, Saint Patrick’s Day. I mean every holiday in the world we celebrate with a big history about it and why we do it and stuff like that.” She added, “One of our families’ house burned down and all the kids started collecting stuff for the family.” In addition, every month the school has a birthday cake and celebrates the birthdays for that month. At Easter the school has a parade and the students who are parents bring their children. “They are so proud and happy. It is really nice,” she said. Describing the impact of the program on the students, she said:

> Because of the kind of kids we have-I mean, having a kid come in every day and smiling you know and saying ‘Good morning, hello’ and then once they feel the success and that they are going to succeed. Once they feel that you can’t stop them.

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